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Taking A Moment To Give Thanks

ANDY McNAMARA
EDITOR-IN-CHIEF
andy@gameinformer.com

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comment on this letter at
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My "work anniversary" came around again on December 9th, 2019, marking my 29th year with this company. As I reflect on that time, I am struck by how lucky I am to have the opportunity to work with so many amazing people. My big takeaway from over 25 years as *Game Informer*'s editor-in-chief is that the people who work here have always been what makes *Game Informer* what it is.

Being a game journalist isn't easy (I know, har har, "All you do is play games all day"). I assure you, I have nothing but respect for people working their tails off at more difficult (and less fun) jobs. But the thing about being a game journalist is you never catch up. You can never play all the games. You can never talk to everyone. You can never please everyone. You can never create the perfect piece of content – so the best thing we can do is try.

Our team, and everyone who has been a part of it over the years, have done that. We put in maximum effort to make the best content we can. And remember that *Game Informer* isn't just the people in editorial; we have so many unsung heroes in our Minneapolis HQ (and beyond) that make all the magic happen. From our creative group that makes all our wonderful words look beautiful to our production team that creates all the tools and digital content, *Game Informer* is lucky to have so many amazing people. And, of course, so many fantastic readers who have supported us for all these years.

Especially over the past few months, I can't offer enough praise for the work my team has done in the face of adversity. They are truly champions for gamers and the industry as a whole; they go beyond expectations, and I couldn't be prouder of all they do.

This issue is a testament to that dedication. Jeff Cork, who did this month's oral history on PlayStation to mark its 25 year anniversary, worked his tail off to get this massive story to text. I hope you take a moment (well, many moments, since the piece is spread across 24 pages) to read this amazing tale.

I also want to throw a big "thank you" to the artist Sam Spratt, who once again came through for us with an amazing cover. Thanks also to the team at Sony Interactive Entertainment for all their support throughout the project.

Teamwork makes the dream work. Sending thanks out to you all!

Cheers,

32 The PlayStation Oral History Issue

Celebrating 25 years since the release of the first PlayStation, we talked to many of the big names that have been involved in Sony's consoles through the years, including godfather of the PlayStation Ken Kutaragi, Andrew House, Mark Cerny, and more. You're not going to want to miss this first-hand, behind-the-scenes look at the building of the iconic brand. ***by Jeff Cork***

X019
LONDON

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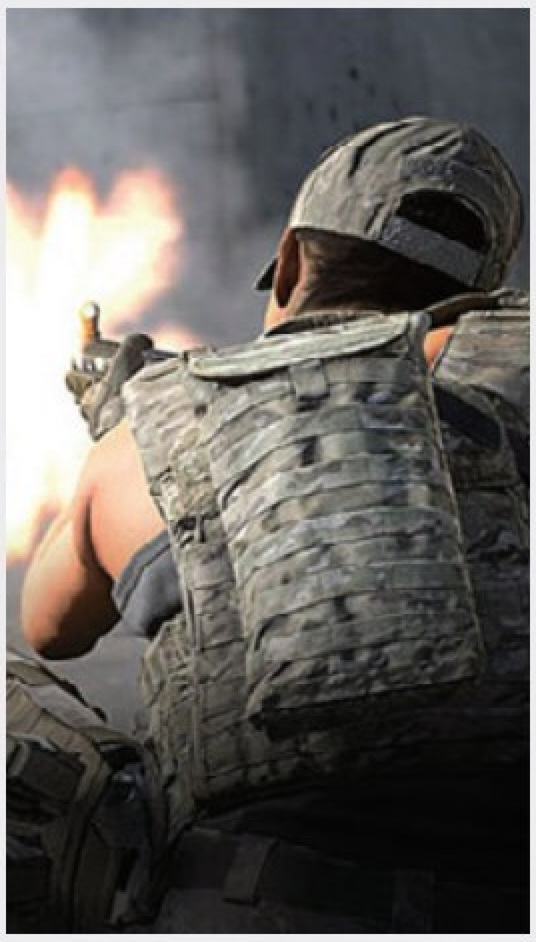
Microsoft outlines the principles shaping the future of Xbox.



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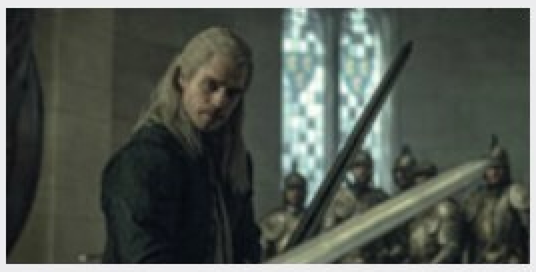

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We interviewed *The Witcher* showrunner Lauren Schmidt Hissrich about her vision of Geralt's world.

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The streamer talks about the role luck has played in his ascent, and his current passion project.

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We go hands-on with the streaming service and let you know what features aren't available at launch.

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Find out more about Crystal Dynamics' attempt to get the gang back together.

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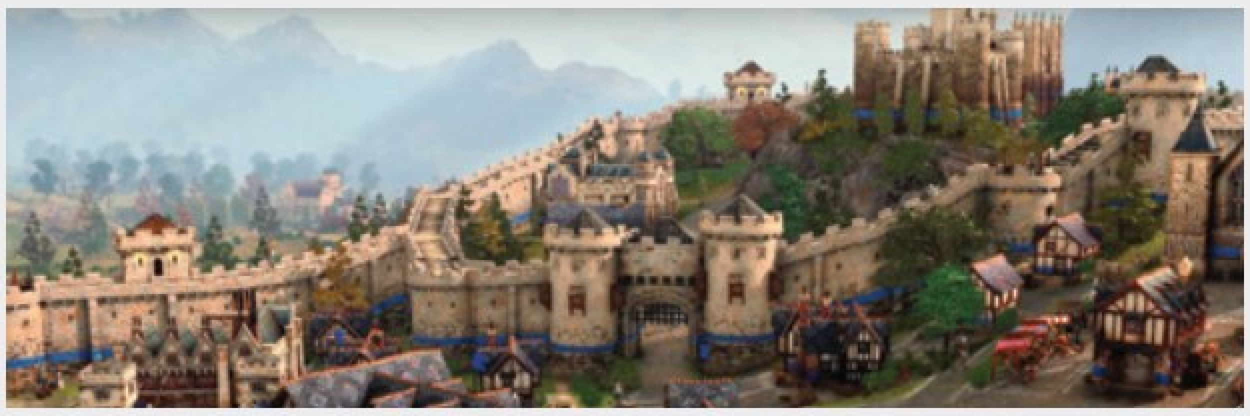
68 Minecraft Dungeons The famed series goes dungeon crawling.



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75 Need For Speed Heat Heat is the best Need for Speed title in years.

79 Pokémon Sword & Shield The familiar is still fun in this Switch debut.

76 Star Wars Jedi: Fallen Order The game needs polish, but it's got where it counts.

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81 Planet Zoo Nobody said it was easy, or even fun, running your own zoo.

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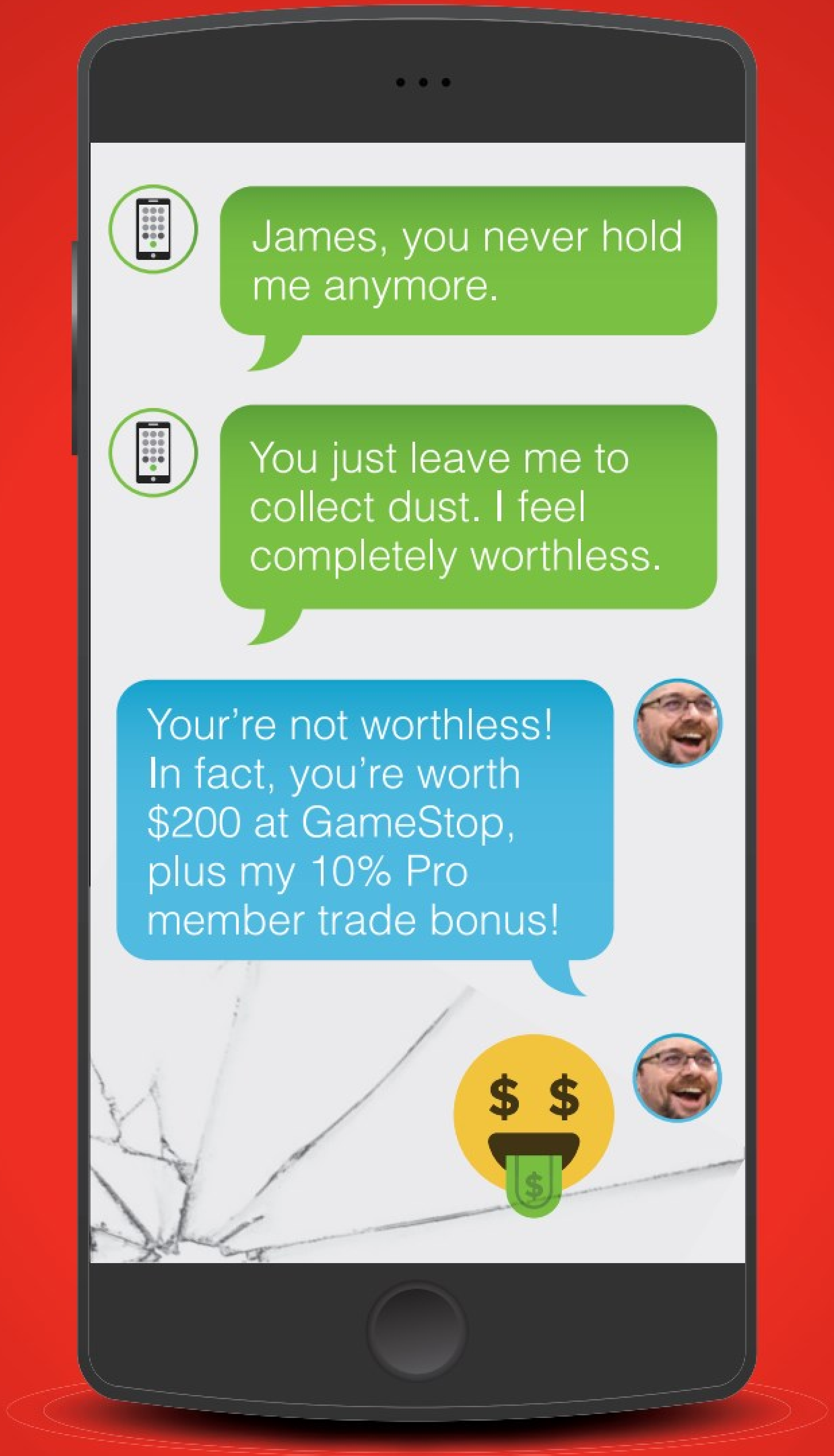

James, you never hold me anymore.

You just leave me to collect dust. I feel completely worthless.

Your're not worthless! In fact, you're worth $200 at GameStop, plus my 10% Pro member trade bonus!

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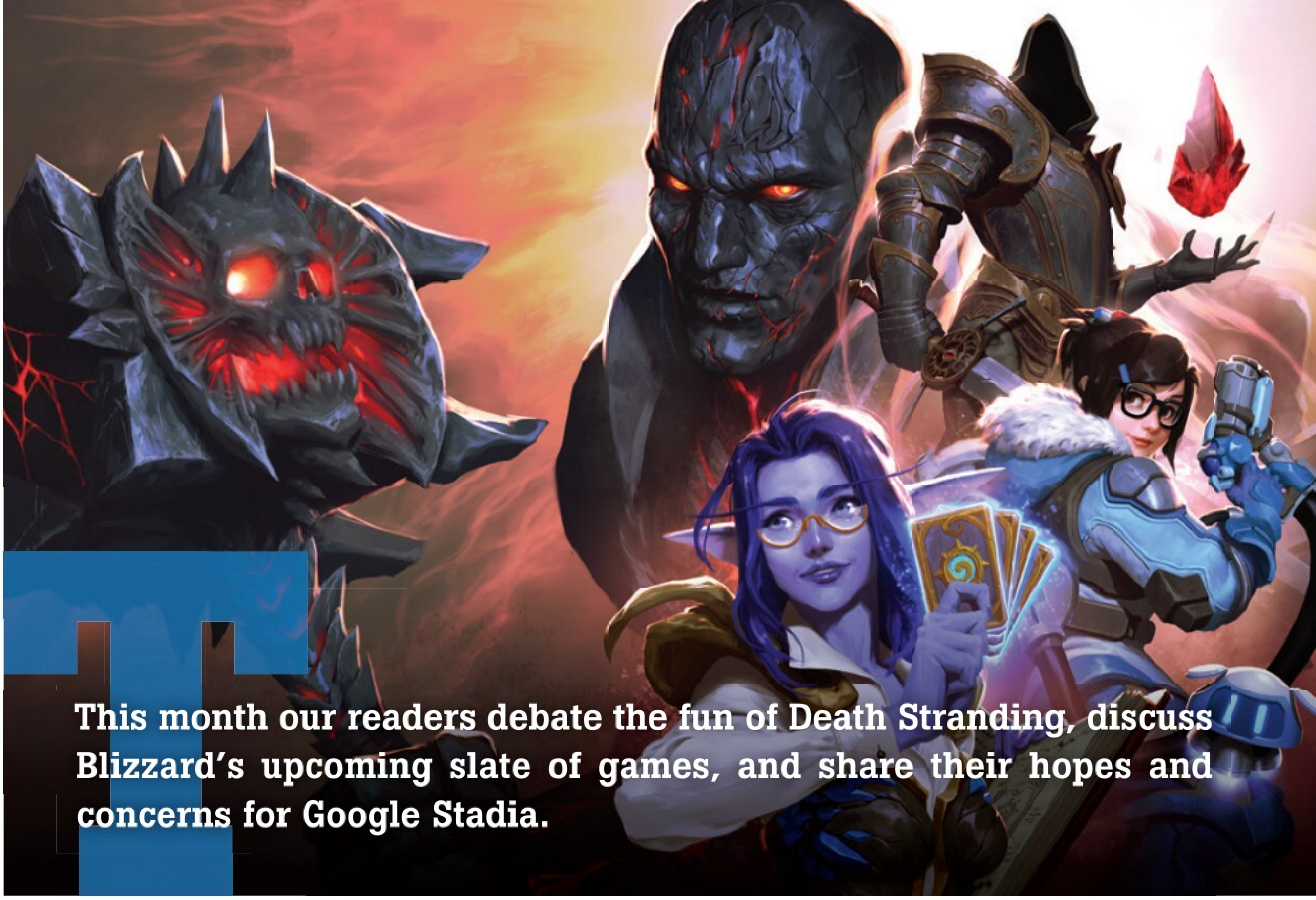


This month our readers debate the fun of Death Stranding, discuss Blizzard's upcoming slate of games, and share their hopes and concerns for Google Stadia.

The Blizzard Issue

I agree with your writer's take that Overwatch 2 could usher in a new era for sequels. As someone who has spent over $400 on MLB The Show cards in three years of games, I desperately want to see my progress carry over to the next year. Thanks for making that the leading point of the article.

Thomas Windruth
Danbury, CT

I'm worried about Diablo IV's open-world design. That's a HUGE change for the series, and I frankly just want more Diablo with prettier graphics and new classes. Should I be concerned?

Drinker of Words
via email

Is Overwatch 2 just an update to Overwatch? That's what I've been reading online, but your story made it sound like the content will be substantial. Any more info you can provide will help!

Liam Brach
Arkansas City, KS

Both games don't have release dates, or even release years yet, and we likely won't know exactly what we are getting or how much until those dates are solidified and the games are further along in development. We're hoping Overwatch 2 changes the world of sequels and is a huge sequel, and we got a good taste of Diablo IV's open world (with several hours of hands-on) and liked what we saw, but can't speak to just how it will be over lengthy play sessions.

Dissecting Death Stranding

What in the hell am I even playing? Is Hideo Kojima telling me that the world dies but Amazon still delivers packages to people? I don't get this game at all. I'm so disappointed.

Tyler Cohen
Phoenix, AZ

When I first started playing Death Stranding, I immediately fell in love with the world, the threat within it, and the characters, but didn't like any of the action. After playing for five hours, those elements I appreciated stayed strong, and the gameplay became more interesting. It's one of those games that doesn't immediately land everything it tries, but does get better as it goes. Give it a shot, people. Now that I finished it, I think it may be my Game of the Year.

Sandra Williams
via email

Death Stranding is one of the most fascinating games of the year. I don't really enjoy what I'm playing, but it's still holding my interest and I want to see where it goes. I can't recall another game that's had this kind of hold over me. It's weird.

The GOAT
Madison, WI

Death Stranding reminds me of some of my favorite TV shows like *Twin Peaks* and *Lost*. It's cerebral and makes you think about things in a different way. I've had several conversations with friends where we discuss what Kojima is trying to say with his world views.

Darla Franks
via email

Death Stranding is one of the most polarizing games in quite some time. Most of *Game Informer*'s staff has played it or is still going through it, and like our readers, are divided in our thoughts of it. Come our annual Top 50 Games of the Year discussions, it'll be interesting to see if Death Stranding receives enough support from staffers to make the list.

Contact Us

Send your questions, comments, and rants to feedback@gameinformer.com for a chance to be featured in the magazine!

We Need More Nonviolent Games

I am almost 41 and have been gaming for 35. I love to play all types of games, mainly violent adventure games and shooters. I have no problem playing them for the rest of my life, but I'm basically destroying the bad guy or opponent in every game. What are some good, current-gen console games that do not have attacks and destruction? I need to mix it up a little sometimes. Thanks for what you guys and gals do.

Marshall O.
via email

We agree games lean on violence too much. If you really think about it, even the Mario series is all about killing creatures to reach new areas. Thanks to the indie scene, we are seeing a lot more non-violent games this generation. We recommend looking at Stardew Valley, Abzu, The Witness, Golf Story, and there's a new Animal Crossing for Switch right around the corner.

Where Is Disney?

I grew up playing what seemed like dozens of Disney games on Super Nintendo, Genesis, and PlayStation, and every once and a while have a hankering to play a Mickey Mouse or Emperor's New Groove game again. Why did they stop? That seemed like easy money for a company that wants more of it.

Sym Leon
via email

Game-development costs have gone up, as has the time it takes to create them, meaning it's a bit tougher to line up a game's release date with the movie's, which was often the case back in the day. We agree though, we'd love to play through games based on Pixar's latest films. Also, how great would it be to have a Mandalorian game line up with the launch of Disney+?

Bring Back Plug And Play

Can I just buy a game that's ready to play?! I bought Red Dead Redemption 2 and patiently waited for the install. Then guess what? A massive update is needed. I just got Modern Warfare and again installed it and there it is 54 GB update! I live in a rural community so there is no access to high-speed internet. I have to take it to town (the cons of living in the country) or to a friend's house who has that thing they call high-speed internet just to enjoy my game. I understand improvements are made after the release, but on launch day? Come on! Help the internet deprived out please!

Nate
via email

Google Stadia does offer a form of plug and play, but … you need high-speed internet to truly take advantage of the streaming services. You could always build a machine that allows you to travel to a different dimension where games continued to evolve, but humanity never invented the internet. We believe that's Earth-0012.

Short Answers To Readers' Burning Questions:

"Why doesn't the new Modern Warfare work with the old Modern Warfare?"

Publishers, do you see what you are making people do? Stop naming your games after old ones!

"What is Game Informer's spirit animal?"

We prefer the term "patronus," but ... it's the untitled goose.

"What's the next game that should be turned into a movie?"

Electronic Arts' The Godfather. The narrative just wasn't quite there, and it should flow better as a film.

"What time and price?"

Any time you want. One million dollars.

Unsolicited Reader Advice:

"Heads up. Hogwarts' butterbeer ain't real beer. I got ripped off at Universal!"

Question Of The Month:

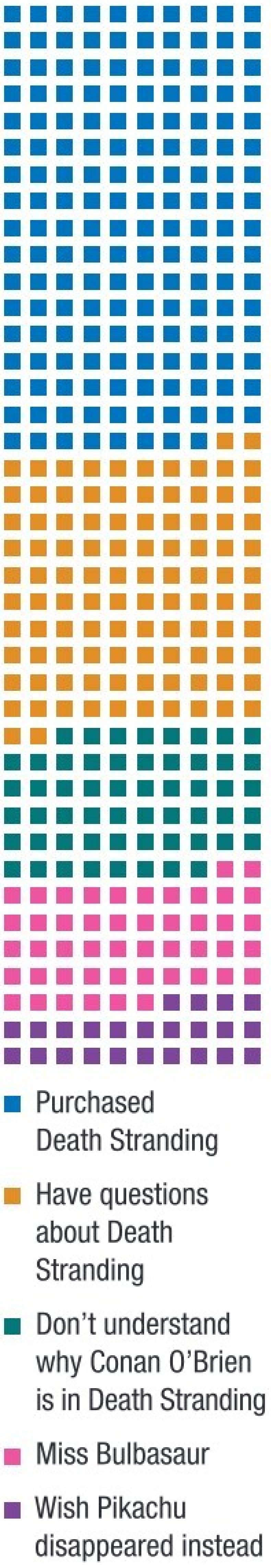
What's the one game you played this year that has surprised you the most?

gi spy

(Left) Ben Reeves and Grounded's game director Adam Brennecke
(Right) Welcome Alex Stadnik to the Game Informer family as our new video editor. He knows Game Boy Color better than anyone

PHOTOS FROM THE VIDEO GAME INDUSTRY

On Your Mind



Borderlands 3 Spoilers … Kind Of

Playing Borderlands 3 made me, happy, sad, and angry all at once. The thing that made me so mad and angry is what 2K and Gearbox did to Maya. I hated this part so much so. I was at the point were I didn't even want to play it anymore. Still there has been no explanation from 2K or Gearbox about why they did this, also why the Vault Hunter didn't even try to [redacted]. The Vault Hunter could have [redacted]. Maya is my favorite character in the Borderlands Series. They bring her back and [redacted], and then [redacted]. I will never forgive 2K and Gearbox for this. This is BS and laziness. Why did they do this? I have no interest in Borderlands anymore. Now if they would somehow [redacted] via DLC, then maybe I will forgive them. But I have a gut feeling [redacted].

Anonymous

Sorry for blacking out the spoilers, folks, but we don't want to ruin Borderlands 3 for you. We decided to share this letter for developers because apparently all you have to do for forgiveness is undo things through DLC. Anthem needs a lot of DLC.

Love And Hate For Stadia

In issue 320 we asked our readers if they would give Google Stadia a chance. You can read their comments and our full review of the hardware and its performance on page 30.

I'll give it a shot. I believe in the tech, just not it being used to compete with the other platforms. It should be a service that partners with the likes of PlayStation and Xbox, allowing us to use Google tech to access our console ecosystems.

Chandler W.

For me, system purchases are based on the software they offer. Stadia doesn't offer anything I can't get anywhere else, and most of it is fairly old. Two old Tomb Raider games, Destiny 2, and Red Dead Redemption 2 … I played all of these. Give me a reason to look in your direction, Google. This lineup is pathetic.

Jenny Lawrence

Being able to click a game and instantly play it from anywhere is such an enticing concept. I'm in … but not at launch. I want to be able to do that from my Apple tech. I don't need to invest more in Google.

David Bean

I'm interested, but I don't want to invest in a system with PlayStation 5 and the next Xbox on the way in a year. I just can't.

Abdel Rabbo

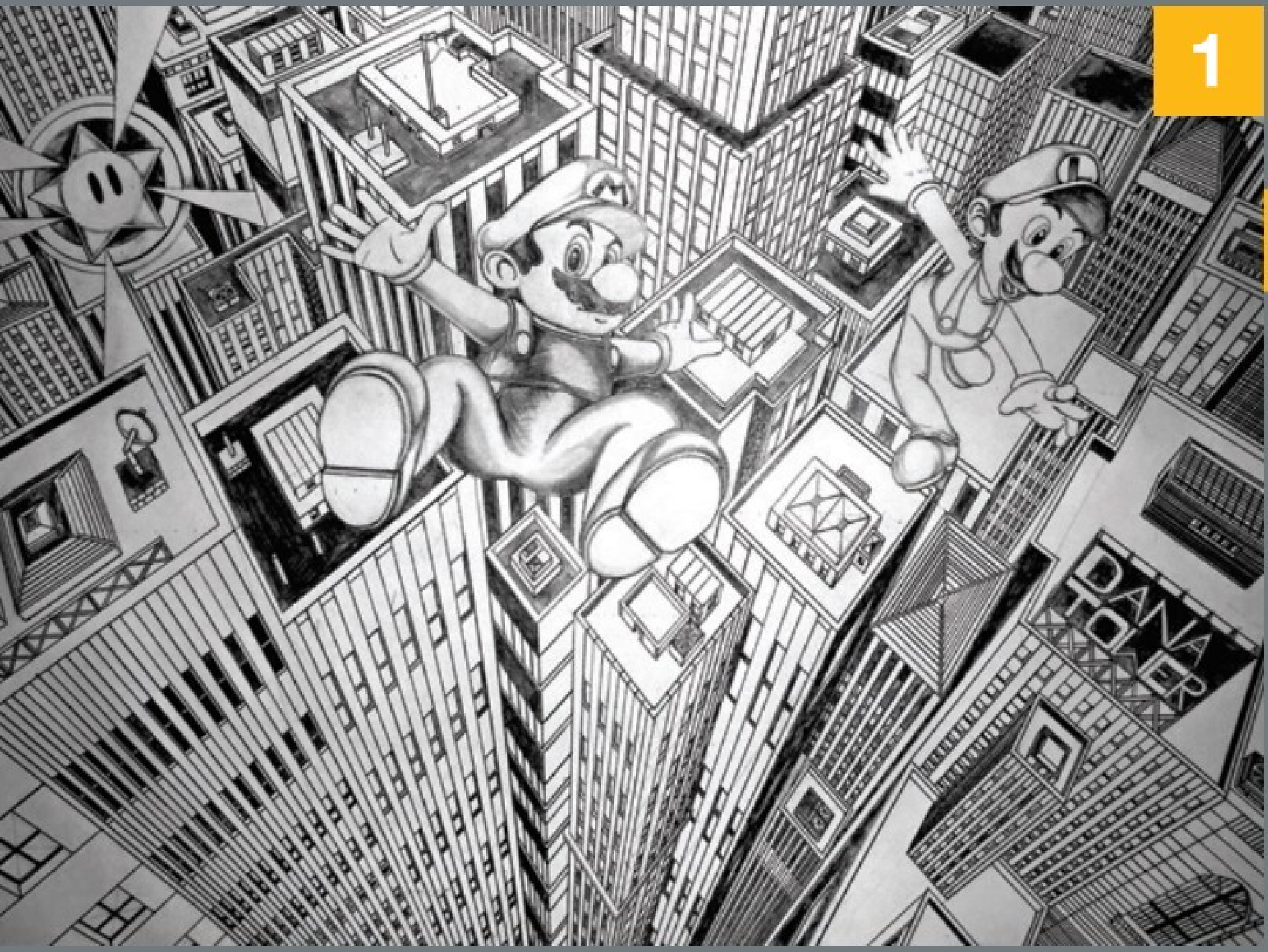
I need to get my hands on that controller first. I remember buying the Xbox at launch and almost crying because the controller sucked so bad that I couldn't play some games.

Sibel Walker

(Left) Dan Tack and gaming all-star Brian Kibler bask in the bluest light at Blizzcon **(Right)** Dan stood here for an entire day, telling everyone that walked by about the great War of the Spider

HOUSE OF BLUES

gallery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WINNER

1 Ray Campion

We all knew these guys would die from a terrible fall, right?

2 Emily Thompson

Seriously, Valve. Where's Portal 3?

3 Malakai Rodriguez

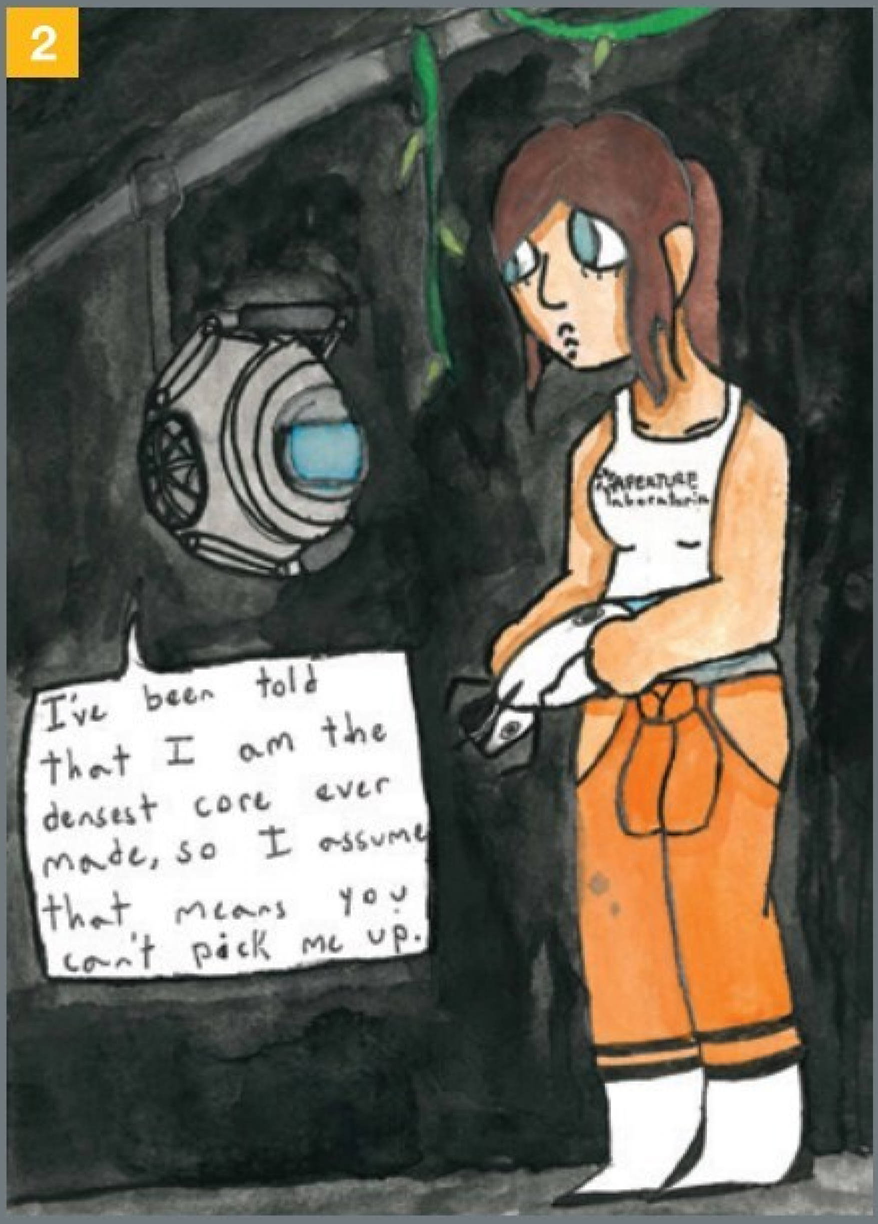
This art perfectly captures the excitement of Luigi's latest adventure. Well done, Malakai!

4 Valerie Monroig

The ultimate battle: sword versus shield.

5 Alexa Contreras

If you stare at this art long enough, it will turn to color and one of the bunnies will come to life and haunt you for the remainder of your days.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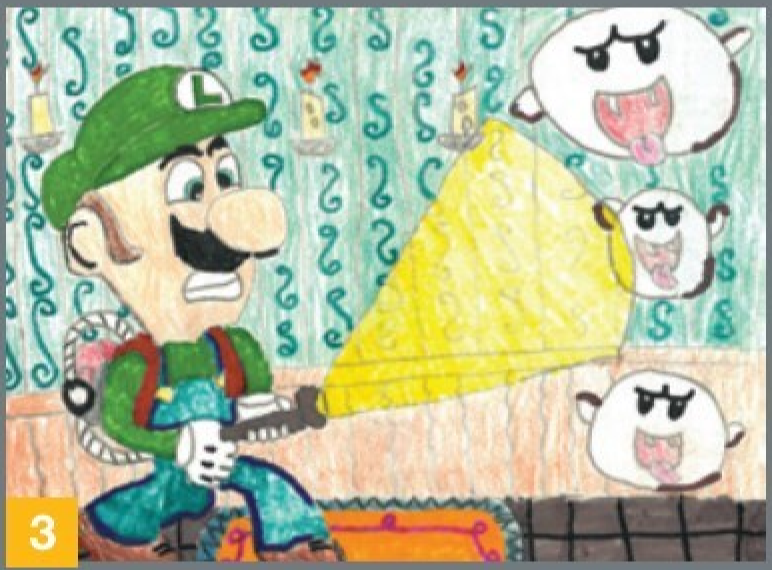
APERTURE laboratories
I've been told that I am the densest core ever made, so I assume that means you can't pick me up.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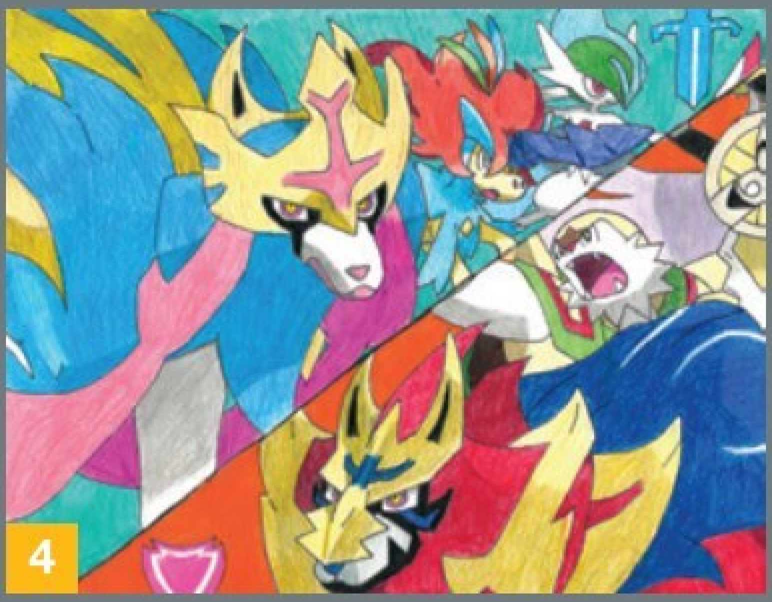
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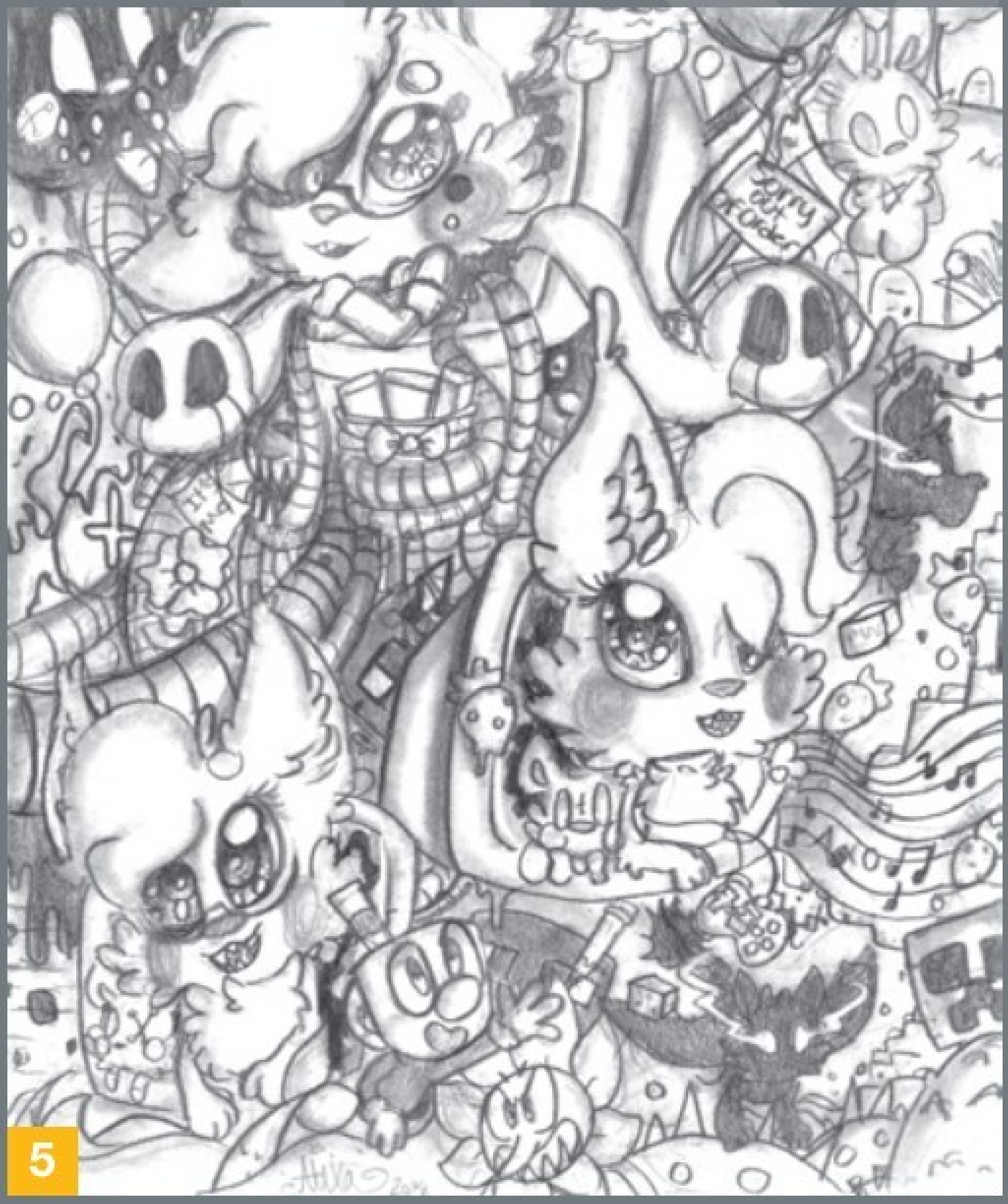
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Send to: Game Informer Reader Art Contest, 724 First Street North, 3rd Floor, Minneapolis, MN 55401 | Email to: ReaderArt@gameinformer.com

(Left) Extra Life put Game Informer's staffers and MinnMax's Ben Hanson in strange situations, such as a room set up for messes **(Right)** Team Game Informer raised over $80,000 for Gillette Children's Specialty Healthcare during a 25-hour livestream

FORWARD FACING

Microsoft readies itself for the next generation

As the calendar turns to 2020, both PlayStation and Xbox are looking toward the future as they ready their next consoles. While details are being kept under wraps for the next Xbox system, codenamed Project Scarlett, the team at Microsoft's gaming branch is clearly thinking beyond consoles. Several pivotal members of the Xbox team spoke with us about how key philosophies on display today guide and position them for the future.

by Brian Shea

THINKING BEYOND CONSOLES

After a rough start that saw Xbox One outperformed and outsold by PlayStation 4, Xbox listened more to its player base, and in the process created an ecosystem that catered to its audience that stands in stark contrast to the reveal of the console.

The team took player feedback into account with initiatives like adding backward compatibility for past Xbox consoles, and Xbox Play Anywhere, which gives players a PC copy of an Xbox game they purchased at no additional cost. "Those come from listening to the customers," Head of Xbox Phil Spencer says. "We're not the first console to do back compat. I think, as a team, we embraced it as well as any other console manufacturer has and really said we want to make it part of the value proposition. That was listening to customers and what they said they wanted to do."

To symbolize this commitment to players, Spencer and the leadership team at Xbox keep an empty chair at the leadership table to represent the customer. Spencer admits it's a bit corny, but it's a constant reminder to the leadership team who they're working for and what they want. "The gamers don't buy things because we need them to buy it; they don't do things because we need them to go do them," he says. "They do things because it matches what they need, and sometimes, frankly, what gamers want in the near term isn't always the best business decision for us. But being inside Microsoft, I think because it's a big company, we take a long-term perspective on things."

This customer focus has resonated with fans, which puts Microsoft in position to have a crowd-pleasing release with its next console, which is due in 2020. In fact, this entire current generation, Microsoft has been giving players new and exciting initiatives. From the aforementioned backward compatibility to Project xCloud, Xbox One and Windows 10 have proven to be fertile ground for new consumer-centric ideas. However, no initiative has been a bigger shake up of the industry than the Game Pass subscription service.

ALL ACCESS

Gaming is an expensive hobby, and sampling a large swath of the industry is rarely as easy as it seems. Taking risks with new genres and keeping up with every major release is an unrealistic proposition for many. Xbox's response to this was to introduce Game Pass, a service that allows players to pay a monthly subscription fee and download games across various developers, publishers, and genres at no additional cost on both Xbox and PC.

Currently, more than 350 games are available to subscribers across Xbox One and PC, including massive, tentpole titles like Gears 5 and The Outer Worlds and indie titles such as Slay the Spire and Lonely Mountains Downhill. "We see players willing to take risks on new games and new genres because when you're already in the subscription it's as easy as clicking on something, downloading the game, and starting to play," Spencer says. "The diversity of content in Game Pass, the genres in Game Pass, the things people play, I think it's a really healthy part of our industry."

This approach has resonated with gamers who not only see value in how many games they instantly have access to with a single price of admission, but in how it enables them to expand their horizons. Thanks to this fact, Spencer says 2019 has seen Game Pass subscribers more than double. "When we started Game Pass, we thought the adjective gamers were going to love about Game Pass was 'value,'" he says. "What it's really turned into is a community that wants a curated set of great games."

Game Pass doesn't just empower players, however. Spencer has noticed that developers, who have often had to rely on a live-game service-based approach for profitability, are using the Game Pass subscription to branch out and explore traditional game models. "You can have games that can just be games because they live inside of a subscription that has a good business model," he says. "It's just an evolving financial model for where risk lives."

With the success of Game Pass from both a development and consumer side, Xbox looks to bolster another new venture as it begins to bring its cloud-streaming service to the forefront.

HEAD IN THE CLOUDS

While the Xbox One generation has been one of new initiatives for Xbox, few hold as much promise as Project xCloud. The service allows players to take large portions of their Xbox One libraries to different devices. Currently in Xbox's Preview program, Project xCloud allows players to stream their games to mobile devices over Wi-Fi or mobile data plans thanks to Microsoft's network of Azure data centers.

Xbox clearly sees Project xCloud as an important piece of its strategy moving forward, and Microsoft has partnered with more than 20 third-party partners to bring more than 50 games to xCloud as of this writing. "[They've] all given their stamp of approval for their games to play with Project xCloud," general manager of Project xCloud Catherine Gluckstein says. "It takes hardly any time at all – I think somewhere less than 30 minutes – to get a game live."

One of the biggest potential issues game-streaming services like xCloud face is lowering latency and providing a good experience over Wi-Fi or mobile internet. In addition to leveraging the power of Azure data centers, the xCloud team is attempting to make the technological requirements as low as possible. The team is currently targeting a minimum internet speed of 10 megabits-per-second.

However, the team knows that eliminating latency in a cloud streaming service isn't a possibility at this point in the tech's lifespan. "What we've found is that consistency of latency is actually much more important than the absence of latency," corporate vice president of Project xCloud Kareem Choudhry says. "We're doing a lot of work to make sure it's consistent as possible. People kind of adjusted the timing and they're able to play a game like Killer Instinct in our public preview right now, and Tekken 7, and other ones that you would think would be very, very sensitive to latency."

The xCloud team is continuing to drive latency as low and consistent as possible, but it's also looking at further expansion as it continues to refine the experience. The preview program continues to expand to additional devices like PC and iOS, supporting more controllers like PS4's DualShock 4, with the team eyeing an official release date for xCloud in 2020.

Of course, this is just the beginning of this new brand of console wars as companies like Sony and Google jockey for position with PlayStation Now and Stadia. To set itself apart from the competition, Microsoft is relying heavily on the platforms and community it has already built. "We're not building a brand-new platform – we're not having to start from scratch," Choudhry says. "Some of the greatest stories we've seen in Preview is people who played Halo 5 years ago, they log in and it's their save data. It's all their achievements. All their progression. That's just an extension of everything that we're doing."

Despite the optimism surrounding the technology, Spencer acknowledges that it's still years of community feedback from maturation, and that it still falls short of the experience players get when their game is local. "The best place to play is locally; I'll say that flat-out," he says. "Streaming is a technology of convenience. It's a technology of choice when you're away from your console and you want to play."

Making A Switch?

In 2019, Microsoft and Nintendo began a relationship that not only saw certain exclusive titles like Cuphead and Ori and the Blind Forest appear on Switch, but also allowed those games to use Xbox Live features on Nintendo's hybrid console. While the possibility for more titles and features on other platforms exist, that doesn't necessarily mean it's a trend for Xbox exclusives to appear on Switch going forward.

"Our real strategy here is what it means to be in the Xbox community," head of Xbox Phil Spencer says. "It means I want to be able to log into Xbox Live, I want to have access to Game Pass in a store, I want to have access to our great first-party portfolio. I'd say that's our strategy. And it's true: There have been certain things that have shown up on other platforms, but I wouldn't say those things are strategic. I think those are kind of opportunistic or partner-led."

What Spencer does hope becomes ubiquitous is cross-play. "If your house buys an Xbox and my house buys a PlayStation and our families can't play Minecraft or Fortnite together, I don't see how that helps grow the industry," he says. "One of the strengths and things I love about the medium and our art form is it brings people together. There aren't other forms of media that allow for the social bonds that you and I probably have both built playing games with people, some of these people I've never met in real life. And I love that about gaming. And that becomes more possible if we have more ability to play with each other across different platforms."

GEARS 5
TEKKEN 7
FORZA HORIZON 4
MADDEN 20

BOLSTERING FIRST PARTY

In February 2019, Xbox announced it was rebranding Microsoft Game Studios to Xbox Game Studios. The decision was a deliberate move to signal to players where the focus is going forward. "We love Microsoft, our parent company, but really, the identity is with Xbox," head of Xbox Game Studios Matt Booty says. "What we do is for the bigger collection of hardware and services that Xbox has become."

During the Xbox One generation, perhaps the biggest criticisms of Xbox One were related to a lack of exclusive content. Players watched as PlayStation 4 and Switch delivered myriad high-quality exclusive titles, while Xbox One became known as a home for multiplatform releases with an occasional exclusive game that often didn't stand up to the quality of those on other platforms.

To help address those concerns, Microsoft began acquiring beloved studios like Hellblade developer Ninja Theory and The Outer Worlds developer Obsidian Entertainment. This not only assisted in immediately building a strong portfolio of studios under the company's umbrella, but also helped set the stage for the future.

"I think we just needed to be in a better position to deliver on the promise of content," Booty says. "We were in this acquisition and growth phase for 18 months or so. Now, we've shifted over more to an execution or delivery phase. When you back up to the beginning of that, as we looked ahead to Scarlett coming, as we looked to Game Pass becoming more and more foundational to what we do, it's so important that we have a stream of content."

When you look at the teams in Xbox Game Studios' current roster of developers, it's a diverse group of teams with histories in creating across many genres and games of all scopes over the last few decades. Because many of them were staunchly independent for much of their existence, being acquired by a massive company like Microsoft sometimes carried with it concerns. To assuage these concerns, the Xbox Game Studios team used Minecraft developer Mojang, a previously independent developer that was acquired by Microsoft in 2014, as an example of how the platform holder is able to merge the two disparate cultures and provide a good experience for independent developers being acquired.

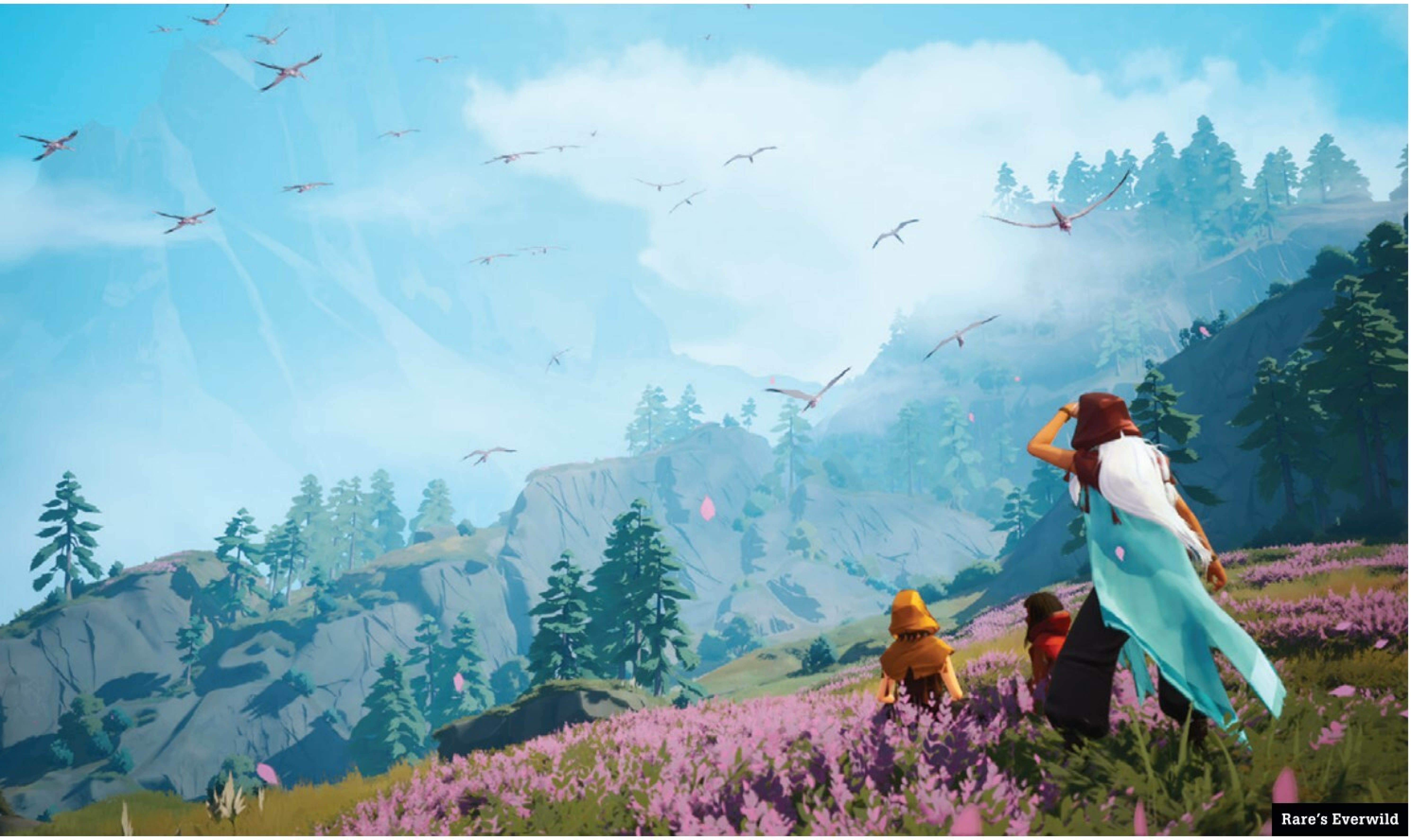
"We're lucky enough that now we've got a track record, but it takes multiple examples to put people at ease," Booty says. "We have a dedicated team in Redmond that just focuses on supporting these studios because we try to walk this line between keeping them as absolutely close to what they were pre-acquisition."

In addition to pre-existing studios like 343 Industries and The Coalition, and the several acquisitions, Xbox Game Studios founded The Initiative, a southern California-based team helmed by Darrell Gallagher, who has worked on multiple high-profile projects with companies like Crystal Dynamics and Activision. The Initiative has also brought in top talent from other well-respected game development teams, while using its geographic ties to the film industry to tap those resources and explore new ways to push gaming forward as a medium. We've yet to learn anything about what The Initiative has been working on since its founding in 2018, but Booty tells me we'll learn more over the next 12 months.

The Faces Of First Party

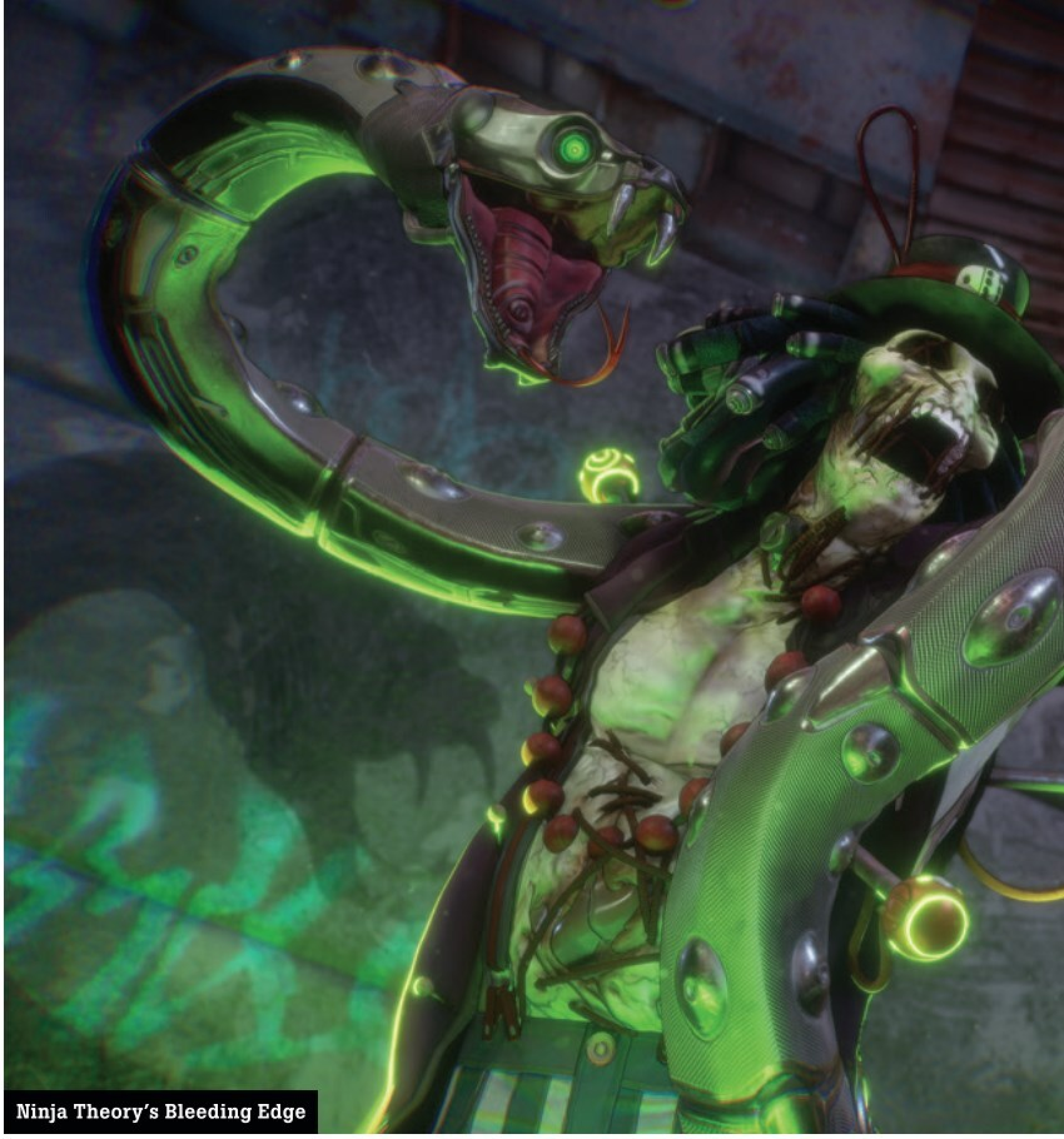
After a recent period of rapid acquisition and growth, Xbox Game Studios bolstered its roster with a diverse collection of well-respected and beloved developers. In addition to Xbox Game Studios Publishing, here is how the roster of development studios looks as of this writing.

- 343 Industries
- The Coalition
- Compulsion Games
- Double Fine
- The Initiative
- InXile Entertainment
- Mojang
- Ninja Theory
- Obsidian Entertainment
- Playground Games
- Rare
- Turn 10 Studios
- Undead Labs



Rare's Everwild

Head of Xbox Game Studios, Matt Booty



Ninja Theory's Bleeding Edge

Obsidian Entertainment's Grounded

343 Industries' Halo Infinite

With such a diverse lineup of studios under the team's belt, both Spencer and Booty identify one painfully absent region: Asia. While the team has been working closely with developers and publishers from Asia to bring new games to the Xbox ecosystem, the leadership team at Xbox doesn't think it should stop there. "Sure, we could do publishing relationships there, and we might do that; I think that's fine. In fact, I would suspect we will do some of those," Spencer says. "But I also think as we continue to evolve our platform, having a first-party studio voice at the table that is from Asia, whether it's Japan or another market, would be a good add for us."

Even with the teams under the Xbox Game Studios umbrella now, Booty says Xbox is aiming high for its output of major titles going forward. Going into 2020, Booty hopes that Xbox Game Studios delivers a large release to Game Pass subscribers and Xbox players roughly every three months.

With high hopes established, Xbox is looking toward to its next major leap in technology, for which Spencer has plenty of optimism. "I think now that we've grown our first party to where it is today, I feel really good about the strength we have there," he says. "Obviously, as we go into Project Scarlett, we have higher aspirations to build a bigger business for the Xbox console business as well, and the team is completely aligned behind doing that."

PAINTING THE TOWN SCARLETT

Officially unveiled during its E3 2019 press conference, Project Scarlett has remained shrouded in mystery since Spencer first hinted at it in 2018. So far, we know it features the capability to reach up to 8K resolution and deliver up to 120 frames per second, and that all games, controllers, and accessories that work on Xbox One will work on Scarlett, but Xbox is remaining tight-lipped on other potential features, or how it will leverage current ventures such as Game Pass and xCloud in new ways.

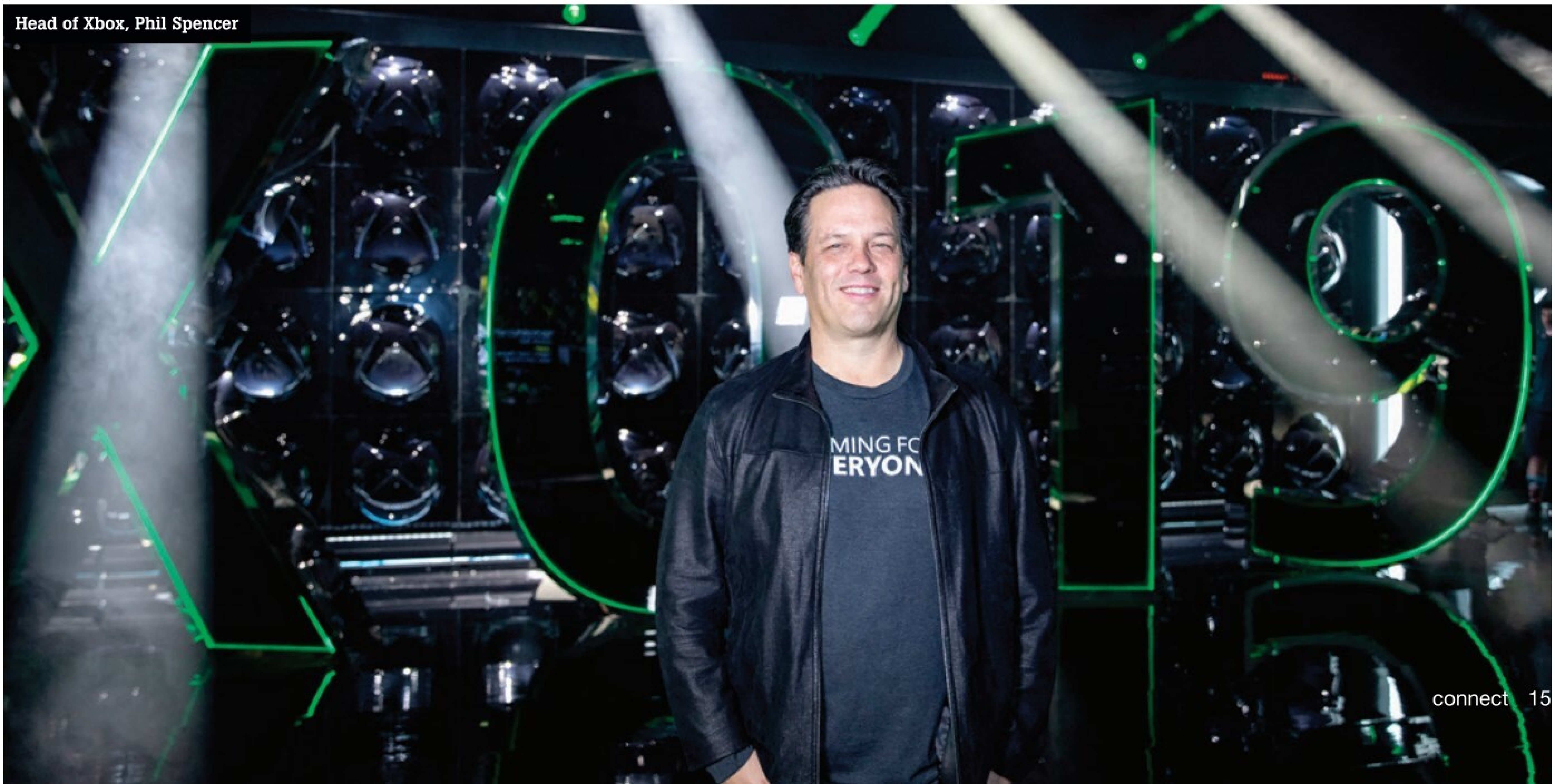
What Spencer can tell us today is that he's excited for the team that did such a strong job of righting the ship of Xbox One to get a crack at creating an all-new platform. "I think a lot of our learning played out during the generation as we were listening to fans and customers on what we needed to evolve," he says. "I love the fact that now this team gets to create a platform that is kind of uniquely ours to go create. Because many people on the Xbox leadership team today kind of inherited this platform, and I think they've done a great job. But Project Scarlett is the platform that this team can go create. I'm incredibly encouraged by the work."

Xbox already has a powerhouse of a console with the Xbox One X, but it hopes Scarlett can not only one-up the 2017 mid-generation refresh, but deliver something tactile to both developers and players. "We talked to our creators; we went out and talked to third parties about some of the trends that we saw in gaming and said we want to build a platform that can hit this capability because there's no reason for us to go sell somebody a console just to sell them a new console," Spencer says. "I want to sell them a new console that actually gives them new capabilities that they can see and feel."

Now, with aggressive and innovative plans in place, Xbox is poised to make a push to become the go-to name for gaming across many parts of the globe. We won't know how these various pieces will further fit together under whatever Project Scarlett ends up being for a while, but Phil Spencer, Matt Booty, and the teams beneath them are confident they've positioned themselves to make a run at greatness.

Scarlett No More

Earlier this year, PlayStation "revealed" that its next console will be called, to the surprise of few, PlayStation 5. While Microsoft is still remaining tight-lipped about Project Scarlett's official name, I close out my talk with Xbox head Phil Spencer by asking him to give me one name the Xbox One's successor will not have. "I could be cheeky," he says with a laugh. "It won't be Xbox 720! You can mark that one off the list."



Head of Xbox, Phil Spencer

CALL OF DUTY: MODERN WARFARE

The gritty realism of the campaign and significant changes to the multiplayer modes have made Call of Duty: Modern Warfare a hot talker, wowing fans with its different approach just as much as its drawing controversy. I talked to Infinity Ward's Jacob Minkoff, the design director, and Joe Cecot, co-design director of multiplayer, to discuss these points, and also learn how Modern Warfare has been received, and what players can expect next.

by Andrew Reiner

The single-player campaign is filled with several uncomfortable moments, one of which is the Highway of Death sequence. In our world, the Highway of Death is a controversial battle that took place on a road in Kuwait City, Kuwait, where American, Canadian, British, and French military may have used excessive force against Iraqi forces. In Modern Warfare, the sequence is similar, but is carried out by Russian troops. Can you talk about this?

Minkoff: The game is set in a fictional world. The middle-eastern country is a fictional country called Urzikstan. There are any number of films and real-world events that inspired us, and maybe that particular sequence in someone's mind bears a resemblance to something that happened in real life. What we're doing in this game has always been to make something that feels true to real life, and feels relevant and relatable, and feels ripped from the headlines. I think it's inevitable that some elements of the setting or the story may harken back and people may make connections that we never even intended.

I was talking to a Russian journalist who told us that our villain Roman Barkov was very similar to a person from 20 years ago in Russia. He sent me articles about it, and I said I genuinely don't believe I've ever heard of this person. Since we are telling stories that feel real it's inevitable that our fiction ends up being close to things people recognize.

There's no intention of historical revisionism?

M: It's inspirations and coincidences. We are not looking to tell a story about specific events that have happened or are happening in our world today. We are looking to tell a story about those types of experiences and the truth that is inherent in this cycle of warfare.

Talk to me about the decision to bring back Captain John Price.

M: It's always so hard to bring back a beloved character, especially with new technology and in a world where the original actor was in his 70s. We needed somebody who was capable of running around the mocap stage, since we do full performance capture. We needed to capture for likeness, physicality, voice, and so many different things. We were so lucky to find Barry Sloan. The fact that we found a guy that is a professional actor and also lives and breathes military authenticity, who has been trained by Navy SEALs to act militarily appropriate and who was available for our shooting schedule and work in Los Angeles, we've been so happy with him.

We ask ourselves the questions: Have we hit the nail on the head? Are we creating a character that's new and fresh, yet still captures the essence of him that fans feel that nostalgia but also the newness of the performance? We compare it to the difference between Pierce Brosnan's James Bond and Daniel Craig's James Bond. Craig's is so much more modern, gritty, and relevant to the world we live in now, and we took that as kind of a goal. Can we do our Daniel Craig version of Captain Price? There was a risk there that fans wouldn't like him. What I've seen is that fans are super excited about our new version of him, and we have in fact nailed it. I'm looking forward to telling more stories with Price in the future.

You have a flashback sequence to a young Farah Karim, who is forced to kill. I thought it was crazy over the top. What is the community's reaction so far?

M: We've always been trying to do things in this game that will draw emotion out of the player. That's our number one goal. [Many of the Modern Warfare team] has worked on franchises where the gameplay, story, and the emotional experience of the player are perfectly enmeshed. There's no way to extricate story and character from gameplay. I think one of the most exciting things of being a game developer, and particularly when working on single-player story content, is the opportunity to place the player in the shoes of a character who they would never be in real life and draw emotion out of them in a way that no other media can. I think we've seen that a lot of players have been impacted by that sequence and it made them think about the characters in the game and their emotional connection to them. We put you in her shoes and make you feel what she as a character feels so that you emphasize with her and buy into her story.

We've also seen people say, "Wow, I bet there are children that get stuck in terrible situations in war in the real world and I've never really thought what it might be like to be one of them, and now this makes me think more about the world that I live in." That's even a higher goal. For us, when we get to draw emotion out of the player that way, we feel it's an incredible success. I often talk to people about our storytelling methodology. We believe cutscenes are for plot and maybe characters expressing their perspectives. Cutscenes are not for action or emotional investment. We believe emotional investment can only be created on the stick in gameplay. If you want the player to buy into the emotional arc of a character, you must put the player into emotional parity with the protagonist. That's what a sequence like that does.

Black Ops IV didn't have a campaign, and that was met with some backlash. You brought a story experience back. How has the engagement been in terms of number of players? Do people really want Call of Duty campaigns?
M: I don't know what I'm allowed to say, so I'm going to be vague about it. I will say players are engaging extremely well with this campaign.

Many *Game Informer* staffers loved the mission Going Dark and how it had multiple entry points and freedom. How did that mission come to be?
M: An interesting thing about Call of Duty single-player design as compared to other types of games is that Call of Duty almost uniquely gives you very different types of experiences with each mission. There's a core type of gameplay that underlies all of them, but the feeling of having variety and disparate experiences all tied together by story and military themes is the nature of a Call of Duty level. The fun thing about Going Dark is that's the level where we delve into stealth mechanics and shooting lights and almost an open-world type of experience, where you can go to any objective in any order. What we do is have earlier missions like Clean House and the Wolf's Den, where we are teaching you the elements of Night-Vision Goggle gameplay, and then you play through most of the campaign and we say, "Here, we're going to give you the most player agency and most opportunities to play with all of these toys." We love giving player experiences like that, and want to give you more experiences like that in the future where you get a wide range of tactics, choice, and agency but always have to balance those that are more tightly controlled and cinematic.

What are you seeing from the community in terms of the balance of multiplayer?
Cecot: The patch we just dropped is our first big step to reacting to how the game has performed in the wild. It's one thing to test with 300 people and another with millions of them. So, we get a lot of stats, and we look at weapon balance. The community may feel one way and we look at the stats and say, "Well, that's not exactly true." The first thing we did is a big pass on weapon balance, and take ARs and make them not stomp on SMGs as much and LMGs and sniper rifles. We increased player speed and are trying to put more mobility into the game. We really built this game to add back a more consistent predictability in combat, and that's why you have louder footsteps, tracer rounds so you can see where people are firing from, and certain mechanics toned down. That was for game health and understandability. When a player jumps in they are getting the visual and audio cues that allow them to learn the game. With this update, we may have gone a little too far, and now we are trying to fine tune it. That's our focus now.

What do you do about the cries of camping?
C: It's not always a map thing in our minds. Each map is its own snowflake that plays a different way. Something that Jeff Smith, our other designer on multiplayer, one of his dirty secrets to making the original Modern Warfare was when you went away from power weapons, you had to have power locations on the map. We intentionally have those on the maps. That's the hill you take and when a player kills you going in there, you now have a boss fight, and you want to take that player out. We think that is healthy, but the thing we need to react to is making sure that player who is holding that place doesn't have too much power to do so and the other thing the player who is challenging them has enough tools to do so. The snapshot or concussion grenade are ways for you to deal with that. Us toning down footstep sounds in a future update will let you sneak up on that player better. We made it so you can counter claymores with bullets without dying – that will help. A lot of times the community is like, "This thing is difficult to deal with, take it out," but the answer is we should make it so you can deal with it. There's a back and forth.

What can the community expect next from new MP content?
C: We're going to continue to update. We are working on a bunch of maps, including new ones for Gunfight, 6v6, and Ground War. We're going to keep the core multiplayer feeling fresh and new, and are going to continue to look at gun balance and keep reacting to the data. We're going to keep launching new promoted modes, like fan favorites Gun Game, Infected, and a bunch of modes that are coming down the line, including new ones we haven't done before. Gunfight tournaments are also on the way. We're just trying to make sure it's ready to go.

THE OUTER WORLDS

If you felt burned by high-profile sci-fi RPGs in recent years, The Outer Worlds could be the game to restore your faith in the subgenre. The humor, depth, and variety in Obsidian's latest adventure reminds us how much fun it can be to explore uncharted worlds with a ship full of colorful companions. We talked to The Outer Worlds co-directors Tim Cain and Leonard Boyarsky about the game's success, who should create a dumb character, and what features didn't make the final cut. *by Joe Juba*

In addition to the general acclaim, a lot of players are finding their way to The Outer Worlds through comparisons to series like Mass Effect and Fallout. How do you feel about those comparisons?
Boyarsky: As long as they're made favorably, they're great.

Cain: I think they're all accurate – to a point. But if anybody dives into the game thinking, "I'm getting a new Mass Effect!" or "I'm getting a new Fallout!" they're going to be disappointed, because it isn't Fallout and it isn't Mass Effect.

Just before the game released, what aspect of it were you most nervous to see the players' response to?
C: For me, I played it 16 times before we shipped with wildly different characters. And I had really different experiences, but the one thing that was worrying me was some of those playthroughs were harder than others, even on normal difficulty. So I was worried that somebody might discover a build that you literally can't finish the game with. Or might find a build that runs into a lot of issues early on that we hadn't seen, because there are just so many different builds you can make.

For the dumb character option, there's a lot funny dialogue, but it also puts players at a noticeable disadvantage. How much work was it to support that kind of playthrough, and did you ever question if it was worth it?
B: We're silly that way. If we decide we want something, like a dumb dialogue path, we will fight to the end to keep it. The writers might have a different opinion on this, but it's not a huge burden on them … There are very few places where you have specifically distinct and different options because you are dumb. For us, it was more about role-playing and adding that humor to the game.

C: I'm not embarrassed to say that sometimes those dumb options were the things I was thinking I wanted to say. But when I saw them in the list of options, they had "dumb" in front of them. So I don't know if that was a comment from the writers on me, or what.

As an optimizer, I personally had trouble justifying the trade-off when I was offered a flaw. What kind of player do you see really getting into the flaw system?

C: I think the same players who like playing with below-average intelligence. If you play a dumb character, you've essentially started with a flaw. Players who got into that, would probably get into flaws. We've had people say, "The game's really easy." And I say, "Were you playing on hard?" "No, normal." "Did you take any flaws?" "No." And I'm like, "The game could be a lot harder than what you're playing! You're choosing to make it easy."

B: A lot of people look at it as a trade-off between the flaw and the perk point you get, and that was always supposed to be part of the equation, but I think the original impetus was letting players adjust their difficulty and create a flawed hero. It's a lot more about role-playing than min-maxing. We started adding in the perk point to sweeten the deal.

The game has several big choices with many repercussions to consider, but on some level, don't you have to be a bit of a monster to side with the Board?
B: We tried to give them legitimate motivations – things they believed in, not just doing it for the sake of being evil. But yeah, at the end of the day, they are pretty much on the side of evil … I think the game would have felt gray (and not in a good way) if everybody was just kind of in the middle. There's no real tension; you need to have some kind of antagonist. Through the characterization of Sophia, we were trying to put a face on it and put forward some kind of sympathetic argument.

Can you think of an example of something you had to cut from The Outer Worlds that you wish could have made it in?
B: The ones that come to my mind are things I don't want to talk about, because I'm like, "Oh, those are good ideas."

C: Either the wound is too fresh, or we're thinking about using it in the future. I do know the original idea for flaws was that there was a tailored perk for the flaw. They came in pairs; if you take Acrophobia, there was a really cool specific bonus too. It wasn't just, "Here's a perk point." But we had to get rid of that because there wasn't enough time to implement all those, and we were having trouble coming up with that unique and special pairing. "Okay, I'm more susceptible to corrosion damage. What does that mean I can do?" So we had to abandon it and say, "Here, you get a perk point."

You've been pretty straightforward about your desire to make a sequel. Is that the next step for you? Or could we see expanded content for the original first?
B: We'll have to wait and see on that. There's a ton of stuff we'd love to do on either of those fronts, but we'll see what happens. How's that for a cagey response?

Nah, that's fair. But the big thing you tease at the end about Earth – that's your hook for a sequel, right?
C: Whaaa? What happened to Earth? [Laughs] ◆

LOST PLAYSTATION GAMES WE'D LIKE TO SEE COME BACK

by Andrew Reiner

Jak & Daxter

Naughty Dog thought about returning to this series, and even released concept art of what it would look like, but ended up moving on to other projects. Abandoning this beloved series was the right thing to do at the time, but we'd love another platformer from this studio, especially one with a fuzzy critter along for the ride.

Shadow of the Colossus

Wander's story may be over, and sure, the world is healed, but we just want new colossi to climb on. Even if it has a different name or is a spiritual successor, the idea behind Shadow of the Colossus is too good to pass up for long, especially given what could be accomplished on the high-end machines of today.

Twisted Metal

Even after a lengthy hiatus, Twisted Metal is still the king of vehicular multiplayer action. As much as we enjoy the single-player campaign (and endings), we could see this series continuing on as a multiplayer-only experience, perhaps even in a sprawling, battle-royale setting. Of all of the games on the list, this is the one that makes the most sense for returning.

Syphon Filter

Now that Sony Bend has released Days Gone, why not give Gabe Logan and Lian Xing another terrorist threat to thwart? In a world that no longer gives us Splinter Cell games, a new Syphon Filter would do wonders to scratch our stealth/espionage itch. This series delivered fun run-and-gun action, sneaking, and a taser that could start people on fire. The stories were also quite good.

The Legend of Dragoon

This turn-based RPG was considered a success with over one million units sold, but oddly never received a sequel. Designed similarly to Final Fantasy VII, players explored beautiful pre-rendered backdrops and engaged in turn-based battles, which delivered a unique wrinkle of timing-based sword strikes.

NFL GameDay

We know Electronic Arts has the NFL in a headlock, but competition in the market is a good thing, and who knows what football games would be like if 2K and GameDay continued without interruption. Sony has proven it can make a hell of a modern sports game with MLB The Show, and we expect an NFL game would get the red-carpet treatment as well.

SOCOM

As much as we love Sony's recent focus on single-player games, the company has a potentially great multiplayer experience waiting in the wings in SOCOM. While the series lost its way in the sequels, the original's three multiplayer modes were superb.

Dark Cloud

Part city builder, part adventure, Dark Cloud reminded us of our love of Actraiser, yet also managed to win us over with its combat, story, and visuals. After exploring dungeons filled with monsters and new weapons, the player would retreat to the village to manually add new buildings.

The Mark of Kri

At first glance, this Sony San Diego-developed stealth/action game may look like a children's animated film with cartoony character designs and a vibrant Polynesian-inspired world, but when the violence erupts, it more than earns the M-rating. The directional combat worked well, and having a raven at your side was awesome.

Ape Escape

Swinging a net to capture rambunctious apes is a gameplay activity that never should have gone out of style. Players must navigate perilous platforms and use gadgets to track down the apes, each with a different personality. We'd love to see Ape Escape 4, not another gimmick-driven party game. ◆

The Good

A bevy of Final Fantasy and other titles are coming to **MICROSOFT'S XBOX GAME PASS** subscription for the Xbox One and PC. The new year brings Final Fantasy VII-X, FF X-2, FF XV (shown), and more. Also appearing on Game Pass are the Kingdom Hearts HD remastered collections, The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt, and several Yakuza games.

The Bad

Sony is closing down streaming TV/DVR service **PLAYSTATION VUE**, leaving consumers looking for alternatives to Comcast et al. with one less option. Vue closes down on January 30, 2020 after almost five years, and all content will be accessible until then.

The Ugly

Multiple social media accounts for publisher **2K** were hacked, with the culprits posting offensive messages on the accounts related to 2K titles and franchises such as NBA 2K20, WWE 2K20, and Borderlands. ◆

Quotable

"The five titles, yes, they will be on this generation and the next generation, and they will take full advantage of all the new features that are coming with the machines …"

Yves Guillemot, Ubisoft co-founder and CEO talks about Watch Dogs Legion, Gods & Monsters, Rainbow Six: Quarantine, and two unannounced titles.

❶

January2020

GAME RELEASES

Thursday 09
- Monster Hunter World: Iceborne (PC)

Friday 17
- Dragon Ball Z: Kakarot (PS4, Xbox One, PC)
- Tokyo Mirage Sessions FE (Switch)

Tuesday 21
- Mega Man Zero/ZX Legacy Collection (PS4, Xbox One, PC, Switch)
- Moons of Madness (PS4, Xbox One)

Thursday 23
- MechWarrior 5: Mercenaries (PC)
- Rugby 20 (PS4, Xbox One, PC)
- The Walking Dead: Saints and Sinners (PC)

Tuesday 28
- Journey to the Savage Planet (PS4, Xbox One, PC) ❶

❷

MOVIE & TV PREMIERES

Thursday 02
- Deputy (Fox)

Friday 03
- The Grudge (theaters)

Sunday 05
- 77th Annual Golden Globe Awards (NBC)

Tuesday 07
- Schitt's Creek (Pop)

Friday 10
- Underwater (theaters)

Sunday 12
- The Outsider (HBO)

Friday 17
- Bad Boys for Life (theaters)
- Dolittle (theaters)

Thursday 23
- Star Trek: Picard (CBS All Access) ❷

Friday 31
- BoJack Horseman (Netflix)

❸

GAMER CULTURE

Wednesday 01

Marvel Comics: The End

All month long, Marvel is releasing a series of one-shot books that tell the last story for a beloved hero. The first book to release will be Captain Marvel: The End, and then we learn what happens to Doctor Strange, Miles Morales, Captain America, and Venom. All of the characters look much older and some have different costumes given the passage of time.

Tuesday 07

CES 2020

If the PlayStation 5 and Xbox Scarlett aren't officially unveiled by the time you read this, they could be shown at this year's CES 2020. And if they are known quantities by now, there's a good chance they – and third-party games for them – will be a part of this tech-focused show, running from today through January 10. New TVs, VR headsets, and household robots are also expected to debut.

Friday 17

PAX South

Indie games are a huge focus at this year's PAX South, held in San Antonio, Texas from January 17-19. Attendees are invited to a tabletop indie showcase, as well as the PAX Rising Showcase, both allowing for hands-on time with new games from small development teams. PAX South is also a great place for tournaments and the best in video game cosplay.

Saturday 18

Anime Impulse

Held in the Fairplex in Pomona, Calif., Anime Impulse is a two-day show that fuses anime and video games. Activities include panels, eSports, art alleys, cosplay, shopping, and celebrity appearances.

Friday 24

Call of Duty League ❸

The inaugural season of Call of Duty League kicks off this weekend in Minneapolis. Hosted by the Minnesota Røkkr, all 12 of the teams in the league will compete for three days at the Minneapolis Armory, and all of the matches will be streamed online. ◆

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• Made with White Meat Chicken
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GERALT COMES TO NETFLIX

A look inside Netflix's new Witcher series

With books, comics, and video games, there's been no shortage of ways to experience The Witcher. Creator Andrzej Sapkowski built a rich fantasy world with complex characters, earning him several awards and the moniker "The Polish Tolkien." If you're reading this magazine, you probably know Geralt of Rivia from CD Projekt Red's video game trilogy. Now Netflix is creating its own adaptation starring Henry Cavill. With the first eight-episode season launching at the end of the December, we chatted with showrunner Lauren S. Hissrich about what to expect. ***by Kimberley Wallace***

Geralt's Introduction To The Small Screen

Starting early in Geralt's adventures, the first season draws inspiration from short story collections *The Last Wish* (Hissrich's favorite) and *Sword of Destiny*. "I really do feel like they set up the foundation of the world," Hissrich says. "They set up the politics, geography, varying social groups, and the basic tone of The Continent is incredibly well laid out." The opening episode is based on the short story "The Lesser Evil," where Geralt meets a character named Renfri and makes a difficult decision that haunts him for the next seven episodes. "I needed to make sure that the story would change him – that whatever happened to him in that episode would change his trajectory throughout the season," Hissrich explains. The whole event causes Geralt to examine his witcher ways, which is all he's ever known. "I want him to start questioning why he's doing it, and if there's something else out there for him in the world," Hissrich says. "This is where his storyline [intersects] with other characters, because they will introduce things to him that make him think he has a greater purpose or destiny."

Diving Deeper Into Ciri And Yennefer

While some may be disappointed that the Netflix original series won't follow CD Projekt Red's trilogy (the games take place after the books), Hissrich did hint at some nods to it. "I think that when video game fans watch, they will see some [familiar] things that they love," she teases. The new series also touches on core subjects from the games, such as moral shades of gray and the unconventional family dynamic between Geralt, Yennefer, and Ciri. "We're dealing with the story of a broken family, what they're after, and how they change each other," Hissrich says.

Hissrich also gave Ciri and Yennefer more backstory to ensure viewers deeply connect with them. "As a writer, I was actually really interested in exploring Yennefer and Ciri before they met Geralt – what their path looked like, how they became the people that we meet in the book, their strengths, their vulnerabilities, their secrets," Hissrich says. "In the case of Ciri, what she's running from and what she's running toward. And in the case of Yennefer, what emptiness she's looking to fill inside when she's such an incredibly powerful sorceress." Hissrich revealed a bit more on Yennefer's expanded role: "You get little glimpses of her past and the disability that she struggled with as a child. We wanted to let the audience experience that with Yennefer, as opposed to just hearing about it."

However, don't take that to mean the series is going off-script from its source material; Hissrich assures us that the show is staying true to the spirit of the novels. "We are honoring the macro journeys that all of these characters take in the books, but occasionally we go on little side quests," Hissrich says. "We try to explore some parts of the books that aren't given a lot of space." Nothing is ever changed for the sake of being different. For instance, Ciri has a friend named Dora who wasn't in the books. "This is because Ciri is on the run throughout the entire first season," Hissrich explains. "And it's not very interesting to see a character who's not talking to anyone. So we needed to give her someone to measure her journey against, where we created a new character for her to travel with and learn from."

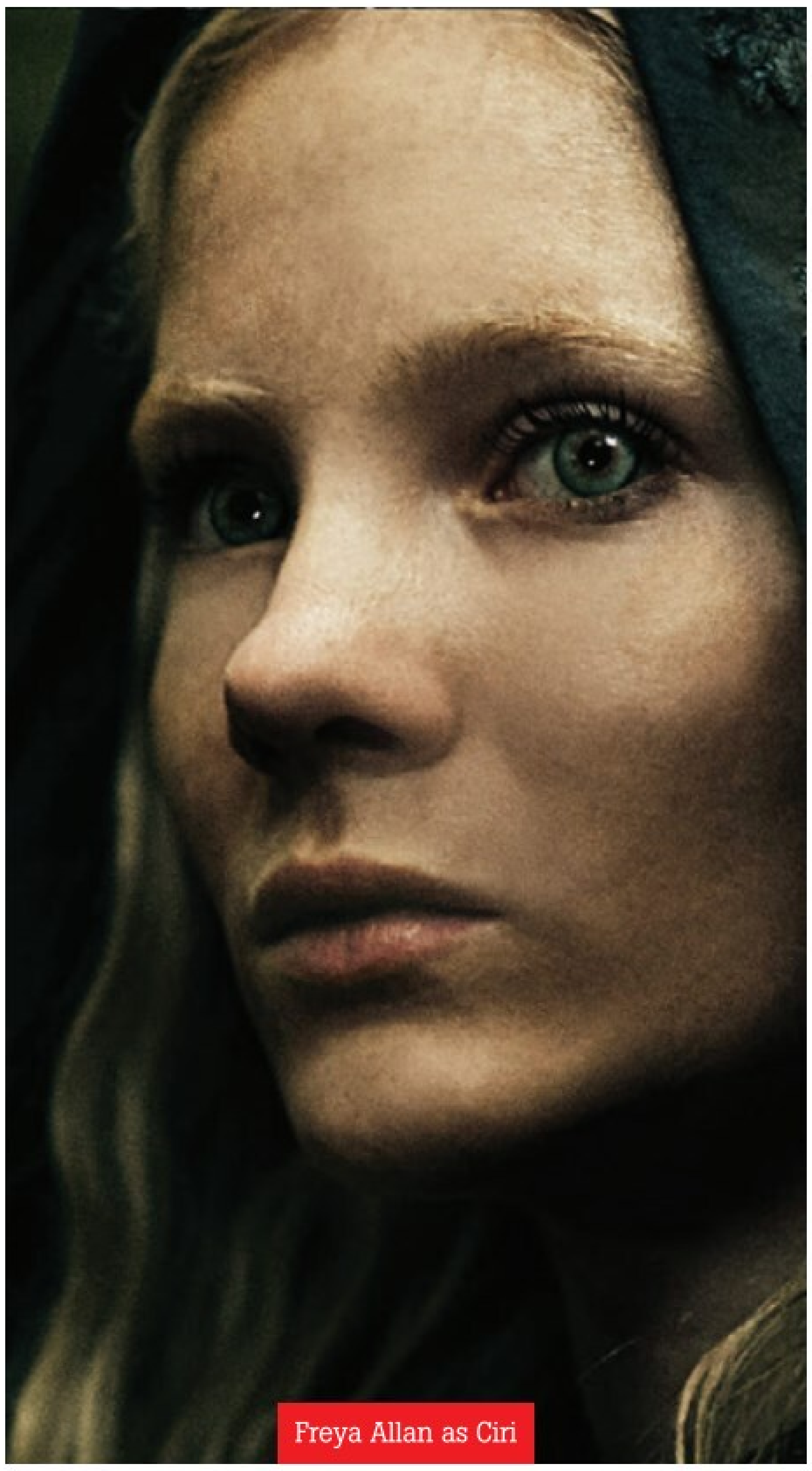
Keeping The Shades Of Gray

So just how far will the Netflix series go into the gritty world of The Witcher? The maturity of the series isn't being dialed back. Expect blood, sex, and adult themes such as "not belonging in the world" and "what happens when you're marginalized." Geralt still engages in his share of action-packed fights against gruesome monsters, and divisive moments are still integral to the experience. "We don't always want everyone to agree," Hissrich says. "When exploring all of the story throughout *The Witcher*, we should see that there are no easy decisions. There is no decision that's definitely good or a decision that's definitely bad. The same goes for characters. As long as an audience member can understand the motivation behind a character's actions, then I feel like we've won. It doesn't matter whether or not you agree with them. You just need to understand why they're doing what they're doing."

So far, it sounds like the show is on the right track, and it looks like Netflix agrees as it's already been renewed for a second season. You can judge for yourself when the first season hits Netflix on December 20. ◈

Meet Your Geralt

When Superman actor Henry Cavill landed the part of Geralt, some people found it hard to envision him as the stoic lead. But it turns out Cavill is a huge fan of the books and video games. He even called his agent every day to ensure he was put into consideration for the role. Showrunner Lauren S. Hissrich couldn't be more happy with Cavill's enthusiasm to get the character just right. "Henry brought a certain violence and stoicism together," Hissrich says. "That is really important and really sort of intrinsic to the character now. Henry also has amazing comedic timing, and this was really important. Anyone who knows Geralt knows that he's actually quite witty. Dry, but witty. That's something that Henry knocked out of the park."


Freya Allan as Ciri

Anya Chalotra as Yennefer

Henry Cavill as Geralt

Hail To The King

Cory Michael, aka King Gothalion, started from humble beginnings on the Borderlands forums, creating videos exploring the Borderlands franchise for fun. Now, he's joining a burgeoning exodus among other high-profile content creators like Ninja and Shroud from the popular streaming platform Twitch for Microsoft's Mixer. Along the way, Gothalion has begun to expand his empire – founding a popular convention and even his own coffee company. We joined Gothalion to discuss his past, present, and future.

How did you get into video games?
I really started playing with my brother. Mario, Zelda, and into the SNES RPGs.

The classics. So how did you get your name?
EverQuest. I was playing EverQuest and looking for a name that sounded dark and silly, and came up with Gothalion. No crazy backstory or anything like that.

Were you a hardcore raider in EQ?
I mean, I was pretty young. So I didn't get heavy into EverQuest, and I had a pretty crappy PC back there. I think I was running at 10 fps or something ridiculous. But I think the first MMO that I really spent a lot of time on was World of Warcraft; that was my first big addiction MMO.

Was WoW when you decided you wanted to do something with games as a big part of your life?
I spent a lot of time in WoW leading PVP groups, I don't know that it really

got me into content creation; that whole thing sort of started like a side project. I don't think I ever really set out to do anything with video games. I always loved playing them. It was just kind of a perfect storm.

How did you get started in content creation?
I was a moderator for Gearbox Software; you know they make the Borderlands series. And I just started making silly videos, posted them on the forums and, and you know, eventually made a transition into streaming from there. It was just really community-based at first, which is kind of like everything that I try to do.

So just funny Borderlands videos on the side?
Yeah, informative videos. You know, like build guides, me ripping through areas, boss kills, things like that.

What took you from there to Twitch? Were you working a 9-to-5 job at the time? How did that transition happen?
No, that wasn't my job. I was a restaurant manager for a long time, and then I was doing stay-at-home dad stuff while my wife was working as a nurse at the time. I started doing Twitch on the side and, you know, taking care of the kids and whatnot. So I would stream at night. Then I told my wife, "You know, I think this is something I could really focus on." And she said, "Go ahead," and she supported the family financially at that point, which was probably a terrible idea because this whole thing is such a roll of the dice. But it ended up working out, and a year after that point she was able to quit her job and I took over as head of financials for the household.

Was there ever a tipping point where you knew this was something you could do full time? Or was it more of a gradual thing?
I think when I first started streaming Borderlands 2 on Twitch. When I look back at it at the point where I was like, "Yeah this is it this is how I'm going to make my money." I think I just got really, really lucky. Honestly, like anybody who turned this into a career got lucky. I don't think there's a secret sauce to making it work. I don't think there's a responsible point unless you blow up out of nowhere, especially with a family.

So with that random element, what would you tell an aspiring streamer today? Is it just getting lucky?
It's getting lucky. I tell them, "Do it because you like playing games and you like talking to people. Expect to talk to no one for a long time because the chance now with such a saturated field getting your first few viewers is so slim." So like, whenever anybody asked me for advice, I always feel like a d-bag because I try to give it to them straight. So much of it revolves around right place, right time. A ton of luck. Some of the most skilled entertaining streamers will sit at zero viewers forever, and that's not a fault of their own. It's just the system, you know, so anybody who says, "Hey, I want to make it big in streaming," I'm like, "Well, you're doing it for the wrong reasons, because the chances of making a career out of this thing are slim to none." So do it because you like it, not to make money. I started doing it because I liked Borderlands content and liked sharing it with people from the forums, and it just happened.

From Borderlands what led to your blow up moment?
Destiny. Destiny was huge for me. That took me from, "Hey, this is good for me," to, "Holy s--- this changed my life." There's only a few opportunities for streamers to hit that blow-up moment, and it was definitely Destiny for me.

So how did that happen?
I've always been a fan of looter shooters. So, you know, Destiny was one that was on the list of, "Yeah, I want to do this. This is cool." Back then I would probably average a little under 1,000 viewers when I was playing Borderlands, and when we switched over to Destiny [viewers] went down a little bit. But when I was playing one day, I think I was one of the first people in the directory to find an exotic weapon, and when I found an exotic weapon, I started getting a lot of viewers. This is like the perfect example of, it's just luck. First you have to get lucky and then you have to do the right stuff. You have to stream a bunch and cultivate the right kind of community. I liked the game a lot and the community was super chill. I mean, [finding the weapon] was brief, but then people kept coming back. So it wasn't a calculated thing. I didn't set out to be on top of a directory, I just set out to enjoy. And you know, people tend to feed off of that.

With the lulls in content in Destiny, were there ever times that you said to yourself, "I'm just going to do Destiny even though I don't feel like it?"
I always focused on the community aspect of it. We started Guardian Con, which was originally Destiny Con, which was a Destiny community-based convention and charity thing. So when we started to gain popularity or notoriety in the Destiny community, we really sat down and we thought, "You know, we need to use this thing to build up everybody around us because anybody who ever tries to build a castle around themselves … that's not going to work out long term." Rising tides raise all ships. I always felt like because we set it up like that for Destiny, you know constantly raiding other streamers and channels, supporting other folks, playing with other folks, building community events and raising money for charity together, it created a family aspect. So weathering those lows was easier back then because it always came back to the core and everybody supported each other. We played other stuff but we always came back to Destiny. The original Destiny con was a meetup in a bar, and it was a glorious, sweaty mess.

Do you see the convention continuing to expand to become sort of a PAX or even an E3?
Yeah, I mean that's the hope, but continuing the focus on the community/family feel.

You have your stream, you have the con. What else do you have going on?
I'm part owner of a company called Rare Drop, which we are working with the Tampa Bay Lightning for their esports activations. Rare Drop also owns 50 percent of King's Coast Coffee Company, which we're now in our third year. So that was our first foray out of the gaming space, I feel like people in the content creation space have an expiration date, so we were trying to set up things outside of content creation. Roast-to-order gourmet coffee. That's been our cool little side-passion project.

So let's say you take over as the head of all Destiny. What do you change?
I don't know man. I kind of like the path that it's on. I mean I think adding more RPG to it is always like my M.O., but director and game director Luke Smith is actually a good buddy of mine. So we kind of share similar views on how the game is going or should go. He's very much a big MMO guy, as I am. Just making the game taller and wider I think is good. I'm interested to see what they do going forward if they do a sequel or if they keep expanding 2's format. So I know I trust them. I trust Captain Luke. So his calls would probably also be my calls. I'd love it if it was one big open world with no loading zones, though. Anything that makes the world feel more alive and creates more player interaction.

These quick-playing and easy-to-learn tabletop games are the perfect choice for a night indoors with a big group of friends

PARTY GAMES

FOR THE LONG WINTER

by Matt Miller

For more great party games,
visit gameinformer.com/topofthetable

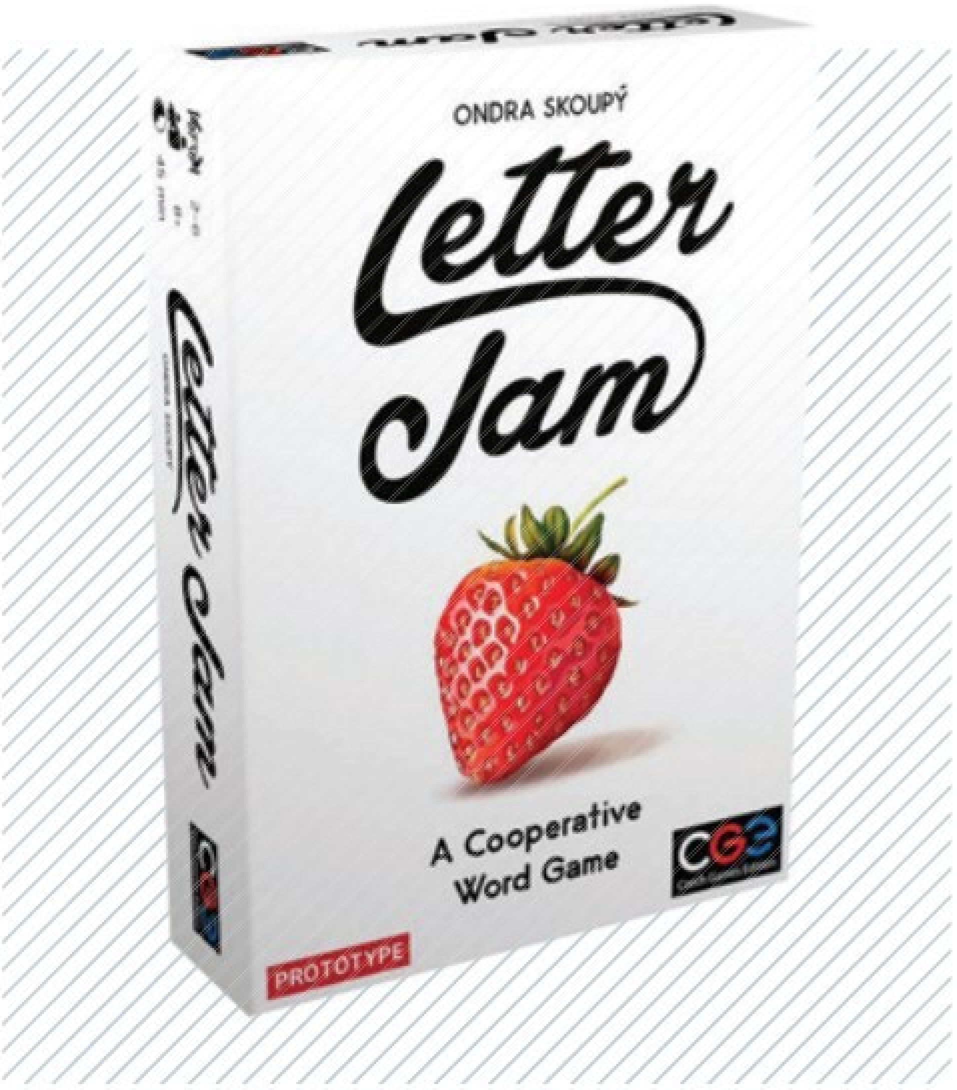
MONIKERS
MORE MONIKERS
A TED talk
Ebola
Log Lady

Monikers

4-16+ players

Recently reissued with new packaging and even some new cards, this stellar party staple demands that you guess the (sometimes inappropriate) word on your buddy's card across a series of rounds that mixes clue-giving and straight-up charades. Fast-moving timed rounds and failed cards that get reshuffled into the deck lead to a growing vocabulary of in-jokes that you'll laugh about for days.

$24.95 | monikersgame.com



Letter Jam

2-6 players

Heady and thoughtful, this cooperative game challenges players to concoct words from the letter cards on display around the table. The trick is, you don't know your own letter, and must infer its identity from the words given. Figure out multiple letters, and a final puzzle awaits, as you must guess the scrambled word created by all of them combined. Mixing elements of Scrabble, word jumbles, and good old-fashioned deductive reasoning, Letter Jam makes for an intriguing challenge for a quieter get-together.

$19.95 | czechgames.com

Tattoo STORIES
Yin Yang
High Heels
Monster Truck
Butterfly
Feather

Tattoo Stories

4-6 players

One player is the customer who selects an absurd mix of concepts from available cards to integrate into a single tattoo. Everyone else draws their idea on a whiteboard (in less than three minutes), and then pitches the customer on their vision for this indelibly printed piece of body art. The best idea wins! Don't worry – almost everyone is just as bad at drawing as you are.

$19.95 | bicyclecards.com

BLACK
DRAGONFLY
COCKTAIL
SOMBRERO
3.4.2
CODE

Decrypto

3-8 players

Split into two teams, and get ready for some code-breaking. Give clues that relate to four numbered keywords your team can see, but keep your hint vague enough that the other team can't figure out the code you're hinting at. Intercept and guess the other team's secret communiques to win. Great for lovers of subterfuge and the meanings behind words.

$22.99 | iellousa.com

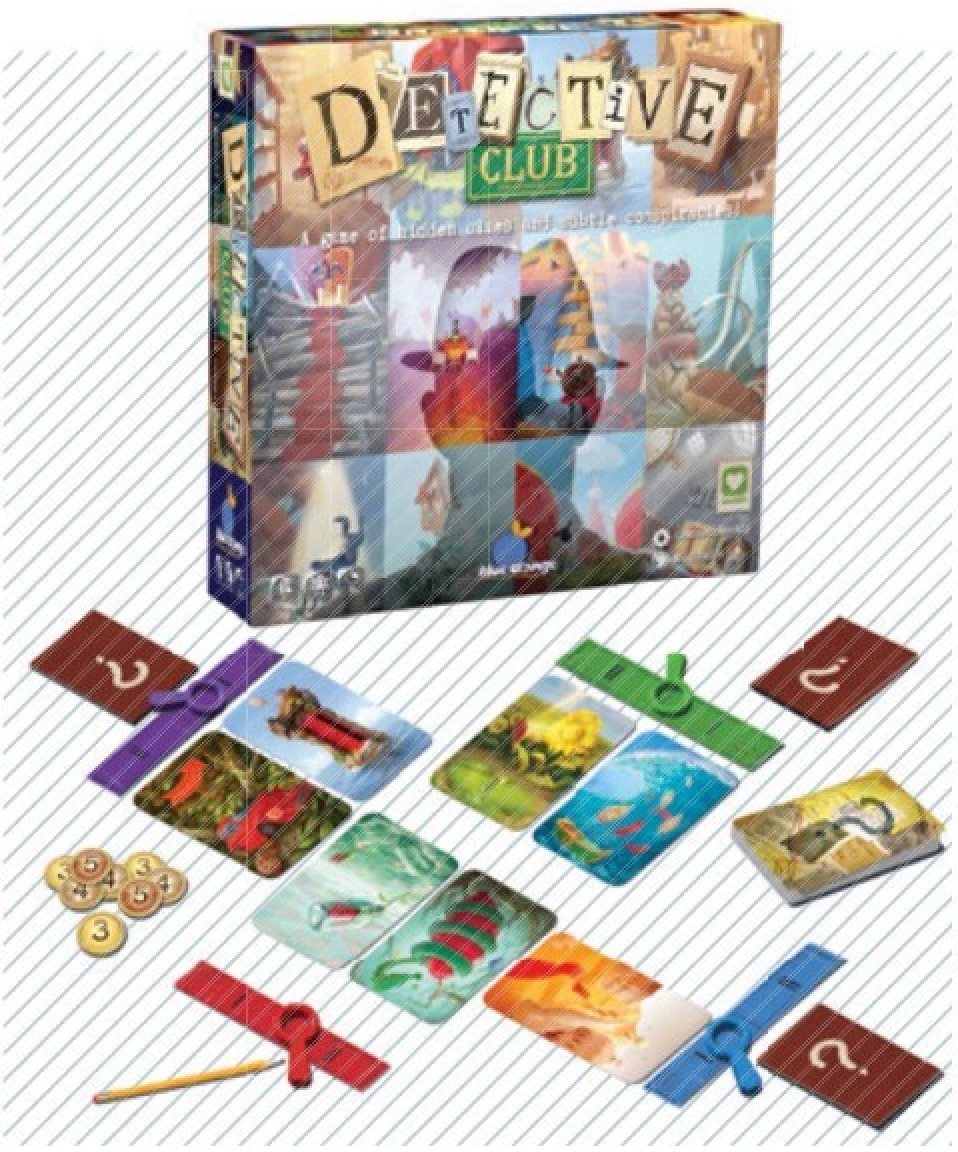
PANTONE™
THE GAME

Pantone

2-20 players

Inspired by the authoritative guide to color, Pantone is all about the way our brains identify objects and individuals by their shade. Taking turns as the color artist, you lay out several cards of distinct solid hues, but combined into shapes that represent familiar characters from popular culture, then try to get everyone else to guess who is on display. It's a surprising twist on the classic Pictionary format that will especially appeal to enthusiasts for visual design.

$30.00 | cryptozoic.com



Detective Club

4-8 players

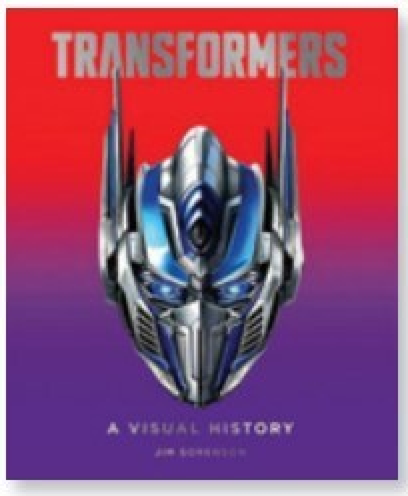
One player comes up with a word and writes it down on multiple pads that are then given to all the other players (except one, the conspirator, who receives a blank pad). Players then take turns laying out surreal art cards that somehow match with the word, including the conspirator, who has no idea what the word is. The word then gets revealed to everyone, and each player must justify their card selection. If you're the conspirator, enjoy lying to your friends! ◆

$34.99 | blueorangegames.com

Media Shelf

THE CALL OF CTHULHU
LOVECRAFT | BARANGER

DUNGEONS & DRAWINGS
An Illustrated Compendium of Creatures



THE CALL OF CTHULHU ILLUSTRATED

Huge folio-format art images blanket this richly illustrated version of H.P. Lovecraft's original short story. The haunting visuals reinvigorate the classic tale, making this a definitive version for fans of the Mythos.

$29.67
frialigan.se/en/store

DUNGEONS AND DRAWINGS: AN ILLUSTRATED COMPENDIUM OF CREATURES

Whimsical illustrations bring life to a wide array of familiar monsters from the D&D canon; the accompanying descriptions make for a fascinating read about the folklore and history that informed these imaginative designs.

$19.99
andrewsmcmeel.com

TRANSFORMERS: A VISUAL HISTORY

Tracing the full history of the worldwide brand through its sketches, posters, production artwork, and more, this chronicle traces the vibrant palette and story of the robots in disguise through all its myriad formats.

$49.99
viz.com

HARDWARE REVIEW

AGAINST THE STREAM

Stadia's streaming tech is impressive, but the platform needs work

By the mid-2000s, Blu-ray felt like the future of media. Blu-ray video looked incredible and offered cleaner picture and sound quality than previous media formats. "Surely," we thought, "the technology that comes after Blu-ray will look even more impressive!" But then something strange happened; as streaming services like Netflix took off, more and more of us ditched physical media in favor of the cloud. Streaming didn't offer the same level of fidelity as Blu-ray – or sometimes even DVD – but it was good enough. More importantly, it was convenient. The desire to watch anything anywhere outpaced our desire for image quality.

Now it's 2019, streaming services have come a long way, and tech goliath Google thinks it has figured out how to Netflix the gaming industry. The tech is surprisingly functional, but its ability to upturn the industry will depend largely on its ability to implement its grand blueprint. Sadly, Stadia's current design is missing several important pillars.

by Ben Reeves

Gaming On Stadia

Stadia's concept still sounds a bit like science fiction: Earlier this year, Google sold a vision of players using wi-fi-enable controllers to communicate with a hive of supercomputers in the cloud, which would allow users to stream the most advanced gaming software to decade-old laptops and mobile phones. Google's system worked well at trade shows, but those were highly controlled environments. How does the service work now that we've been able to test it in the wild? Surprisingly well … if you have a stable internet connection.

On the whole, Stadia performs better than I expected. The high-speed internet at the *Game Informer* offices regularly gets download/upload speeds of 280 Mbps, so I rarely noticed even a hiccup while playing games at work. Mortal Kombat 11 on a stable Stadia connection booted up in seconds and feels about as responsive as its console counterparts. I had no problem dialing in combos and Fatalities even though my inputs had to travel through miles of infrastructure to bounce off Google servers.

Unfortunately, the experience quickly degrades as your internet speeds dial down. At a nearby coffee shop, where I recorded download speeds of 38 Mbps, I noticed a few frame skips every couple minutes. At home, where my speeds regularly drop to 20 Mbps, I experienced some visual artifacting and a regular picture stutter. With these slower internet speeds, I didn't feel competitive in Destiny 2's PvP modes, but I was able to complete a strike without a problem. Everyone's tolerance for this kind of experience will vary, but my frustration over the occasional hiccup was mitigated by the revelation that I could play Destiny 2 in public on my phone (see the controller sidebar for more).

Stadia's service only dropped out completely on me once due to a poor signal, but an instance of my game was saved and I had five minutes to hop back online and pick up where I'd left off. I wish Google would extend that grace period and allow users to create their own save states (a feature called State Share, which is still in the works), but I never lost any progress in a game, and my experience was stable enough across the board that I didn't live in fear of being unable to access my games.

Google's service isn't a one-size-fits-all streaming solution, and you should carefully measure your internet speeds before committing to the platform. Many will find Stadia's occasional stutters unbearable, while others will feel that it's good enough. Personally, I can't imagine trading any of my game consoles for a Stadia stream anytime soon.

Building Steam

Google's streaming tech might be ready for prime time, but its service certainly isn't. Many of the more exciting features either aren't available for launch or won't roll out until 2020. For starters, Google's Pixel smartphones are the only phones that Stadia users will be able to use for streaming at launch. Achievements also won't be viewable at this time, but Google says that Stadia is recording your progress, so once the feature is enabled, users will receive credit for everything they've done since then.

The Google Assistant is another exciting feature that is being kicked down the road. During the Stadia reveal event, Google said that with the tap of a button users could speak into their Stadia controller and pull up YouTube walkthroughs or other helpful advice for any game they played. This feature is absent at launch. Google says that the Google Assistant will be available soon, but even then, the Assistant will only be available from the Stadia home screen and only allow users to launch games or turn on their TV.

Stadia's incomplete feature list is so long it's a little embarrassing. What about Stream Connect, which is Google's way of supporting multiplayer by allowing Stadia users to create local couch co-op experiences via split-screen? Coming later this year. What about Family Sharing, which lets you share games with other users in your family? Sometime soon. What about Crowd Play, which lets streamers play games with their viewers? Hopefully, sometime next year. What about streaming over cellular networks? I'll let you take a guess. If Stadia had all these features, it might feel like the next big leap in gaming, but as it is, the platform is just a basic streaming platform that offers less than a home console.

In the end, Stadia's biggest problem is likely its lack of software. Stadia doesn't have many dedicated experiences that will drive longtime gamers to the platform. The system's launch lineup features some great games, such as Assassin's Creed Odyssey, Rise of the Tomb Raider, and Red Dead Redemption II, but those are all more than a year old and there isn't a single triple-A exclusive on the horizon. This is a big problem for Google. If the company hopes to attract more people to the service, it needs to provide a reason to be on Stadia. In other words: It needs more games.

The Launch Lineup

- Attack on Titan: Final Battle 2
- Destiny 2: The Collection*
- Farming Simulator 2019
- Final Fantasy XV
- Football Manager 2020
- Grid 2019
- Gylt
- Just Dance 2020
- Kine
- Metro Exodus
- Mortal Kombat 11
- NBA 2K20
- Rage 2
- Rise of the Tomb Raider
- Red Dead Redemption II
- Samurai Shodown*
- Shadow of the Tomb Raider
- Thumper
- Tomb Raider 2013
- Trials Rising
- Wolfenstein: Youngblood

**available on Stadia Pro*

Understanding Pricing

On day one, consumers can purchase the Stadia Premiere Edition for $129, which includes three free months of Stadia Pro, a Google Chromecast Ultra, and a Stadia Controller. Stadia Pro is Google's subscription service, which costs $9.99 a month and gives players access to the highest quality streams (4K/60 fps/HDR/5.1 sound) as well as exclusive discounts on game purchases (TBA). Early next year, everyone will be able to stream games through Stadia at no cost, however, the streaming quality will be throttled to 1080p/60fps with stereo sound. No matter how you approach the service, games still need to be purchased à la carte.

The Bottom Line

Stadia seems tailored for a different crowd – the kind of game-curious individual who only pays attention to the occasional blockbuster release and isn't willing to throw down a few hundred dollars on a dedicated piece of gaming hardware. Next year, when Google launches the free version of the Stadia service, the platform might find that audience. On the other hand, Stadia's service isn't currently valuable enough to justify the $129.99 early adopters price tag. Anyone devoted enough to follow industry trends probably cares enough about this hobby to spend the extra money on a console that provides a lag-free experience.

Still, I want something like Stadia to succeed. Purchasing a game and immediately booting it up without concern for downloads or updates is liberating, and when you have a stable internet connection, streaming games off the cloud feels like magic. Oddly enough, Stadia filled me with excitement for a game-streaming future, but it left me with less confidence that Stadia would be the platform to usher us forward.

LIMITED APPEAL 🟦🟦🟦🟦🟦🟦⬛⬛⬛⬛

$129 | store.google.com

What About That Controller?

An online-only streaming service seems like a bold new direction for the gaming industry, but Google isn't interested in reinventing the controller. The Stadia controller smartly hews close to modern controller design. The pad itself has a nice weight and feels a lot like the PS4 controller thanks to its ergonomic shell and symmetrical analog sticks. The buttons produce a satisfying click and feel sturdy, and I got about seven hours of use from a single charge. Of course, Google has its equivalent of the start, options, and home buttons. However, Google added a screen capture and virtual assistant button to the mix, and this creates a jumble of buttons near the center of the controller. I constantly hit the screen-capture button when I meant to pause a game, which was frustrating.

At launch, the controller also doesn't work wirelessly with any device other than the Chromecast. This means that in order to play on a laptop or phone you have to connect your device to a controller using a USB C cord, which I found cumbersome. In fact, I was actually a little embarrassed to pull out my tangle of gadgets to play games at Starbucks.

I also wasn't able to connect the Stadia controller to wi-fi that featured a web browser login, meaning you probably won't be able to use Google's controllers wirelessly in locations like hotels that require a secondary login screen. The Stadia controller might be a nice piece of physical hardware, but these tech issues need to get ironed out as soon as possible.

Editorial Note: This review was conducted in a pre-release environment. We may revisit this review as we play more games after launch and as Google releases console updates.

Red Dead Redemption II

Play

Station:

THE FIRST 25 YEARS

An oral history of Sony's big gaming play, and how it changed the world

The path from the PlayStation 1 to the upcoming PlayStation 5 lines up neatly, but only if you're looking at it numerically. In actuality, for more than 25 years the PlayStation team has had to navigate some of the industry's most difficult terrain. During that time, a dedicated team of visionaries, engineers, and software developers established a brand from scratch, propelled it to unprecedented heights, struggled to maintain dominance, and eventually returned to what initially made them so successful.

Over the following pages, we'll hear some of the stories behind PlayStation from the people who were there when it all happened.

by **JEFF CORK**

It started as a COLLABORATION.

Nintendo and Sony were initially going to be partners on a Super Nintendo project that would take the gaming console – still in development at that time – into the exciting new age of CD-ROM. The technology was still a relative novelty in 1988 when the partnership between the tech giants was formalized. Games could be bigger, featuring full-motion video and actual CD-quality music. The TurboGrafx-16 supported optical discs at the end of the year in Japan, but that console lacked the library of games and large user base that Nintendo enjoyed. Sony was a pioneering force in the development of the CD-ROM standard, and the company was going to develop a special Super Disc format for Nintendo, as well as a version of the console with the add-on built in. That hybrid system would be called "PlayStation."

Under Ken Kutaragi's leadership, Sony's engineers continued to work on the project while the company also dabbled in games publishing through its Sony Imagesoft imprint. Things seemed to be on track until they weren't. At the Consumer Electronics Show in June 1991, Sony revealed its PlayStation plans to the public. It was particularly exciting in North America, since the Super Nintendo hadn't been released at that time. Not only was the successor to the wildly popular NES coming in a few months, but it was also going to support CD gaming. Hours later, Nintendo announced what was seen by many as a surprising betrayal: The company had entered into a partnership with Sony rival Philips.

KAZUNORI YAMAUCHI

ANDREW HOUSE

KAZUNORI YAMAUCHI [Representative Director and President of Polyphony Digital Inc.]: The department I entered as a new recruit after graduating college was the place where the development of the PlayStation was taking place, as a joint project with the Sony Corporation Hardware Division and the Sony Music Software Division. Kutaragi-san was leading this project. I learned for the first time then that a hardware called PlayStation was being developed together with Nintendo. Simply put, it was like an SNES with a CD-ROM drive. Within the company, first-party titles were being produced at the same time as the [Nintendo/PlayStation] hardware, and my first job was to make ending credits for these titles. For me this was a slightly boring job. I knew there wasn't much you can do on an SNES, and I was really interested in real-time 3D graphics at the time.

ANDREW HOUSE [Former President & CEO, Sony Interactive Entertainment]: I happened to be in the office late at night in Tokyo on the night of the infamous CES press conference, where Philips were announced by Nintendo as their new partner – and the fact that they'd left Sony at the altar on the proposed collaboration. And it was me, it was the head of corporate communications for Sony Corporation, and on the line was one Ken Kutaragi calling

from Las Vegas. And we were talking about damage control. How we were going to manage the message.

YAMAUCHI: One morning, a while after joining Sony, I noticed that the atmosphere in the company was very down. The engagement between Sony and Nintendo had been broken. But I think it was just the following day. I remember Kutaragi-san made the decision, "Then we'll make it on our own. With 3D graphics." That was great news for me. I had no real interest in making titles on the SNES system.

KEN KUTARAGI [Former Honorary Chairman, Sony Computer Entertainment]: Nintendo is an amazing company behind a multitude of incredible games and consoles that have wowed the world and made their mark on history. A big part of their legacy is the SNES, for which Sony provided a digital sound chip, and made contributions to its WS-based [Work Station] tool environment. Unfortunately, Sony's hopes to evolve the industry and Nintendo's desire to maintain a certain measure of control ultimately derailed any possible collaboration between the two companies, which eventually led to Sony developing PlayStation. However, due to each side choosing to play to their own strengths, it ultimately took the video game industry to previously undreamed of heights.

HOUSE: I don't think I really even processed at the time what was going on, it was just head down, get to work on this stuff. It was only in later years that I realized what a catalystic moment that had been and that I'd gotten in some small way to participate in it.

KEN KUTARAGI

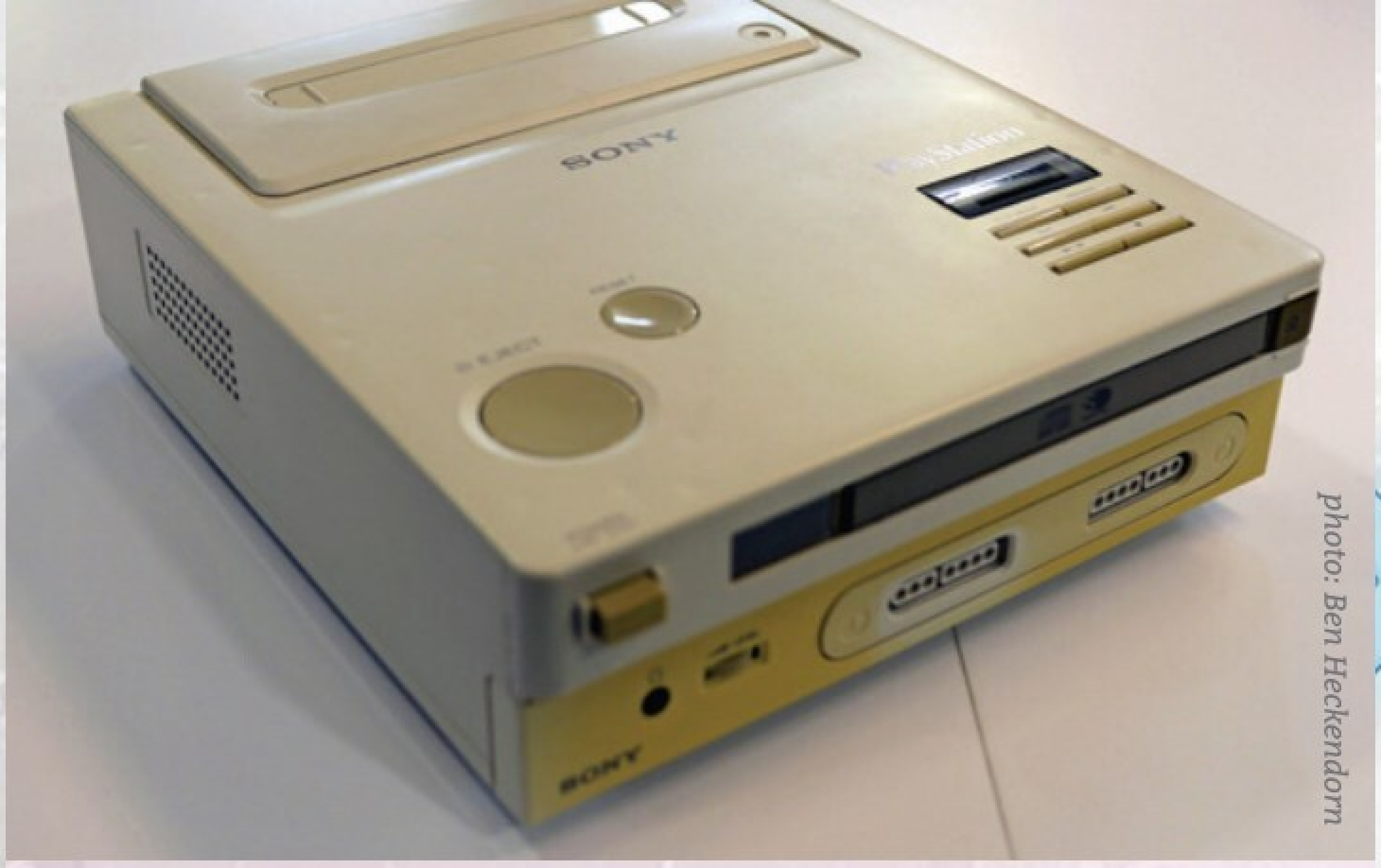


photo: Ben Heckendorn

WAS THE NINTENDO PLAYSTATION DOOMED ANYWAY?

Sony and Nintendo have both blamed the Nintendo PlayStation's demise on licensing disagreements. That may only be part of the story, however. Only one prototype unit is known to exist, won by a collector in an auction. Engineer and YouTuber Ben Heckendorn (better known as Ben Heck) got to work on that prototype, restoring much of its functionality. His experience with the unit – as well as his knowledge on that era's hardware – led him to speculate on some other reasons why the project may have been canceled.

"Usually I just hack up consoles; it's definitely the rarest thing I've worked on – and it's pretty much the rarest thing there is as far as console stuff goes," Heckendorn says. "After a while, the magic goes away and the shock and awe is no longer there, and then you're just like, 'Aw, I've got to get this god------ thing to work.' There was nothing I did that was extraordinary. Basically, anyone halfway competent – well, maybe three-quarter way competent – at soldering could have done the same thing I did to fix it.

"When I was looking at this system, I was thinking about it from a technical standpoint, and it also made me think about why it may not have been released. The Super Nintendo already has superior sound and graphics [over the Genesis], definitely. But as far as memory and bandwidth and speed, the Sega Genesis is much, much faster. The Super Nintendo is a 16-bit system, but it only has an 8-bit data bus. Looking at the system, you needed to have a cartridge inside of it, because the boot cartridge contained the RAM that you would load the CD-ROM data into to execute the game.

"Even though the SNES has really good graphics and really good sound, the CPU is crap. Pretty much right at launch, Super Nintendo games were including DSPs – digital signal processors – and math co-processors in the cartridge to assist the main CPU of the system. For a launch game to have that, it's pretty crazy. Pilotwings, for example, had a math co-processor in it. That's one of the reasons why those cartridges were historically so expensive, because they were having to cram circuitry into the Super Nintendo cartridges right off the bat, whereas the Sega Genesis was just a ROM.

"That RAM cartridge had no additional co-processors or DSPs in it whatsoever. It was just a whole bunch of RAM and a battery backup. The reason I bring it up, is that a lot of the cool stuff we saw on the Super Nintendo games wouldn't have been possible with that cartridge because it contained none of that additional special hardware. You would have basically had a stock, launch Super Nintendo with a ton of storage on CD-ROM and a pretty good amount of RAM.

"Think about how kind of crap the Sega CD games were, most of them. That's with a 16-bit data path, the CPU is at least twice as fast – and almost four times as fast when it comes to RAM access. And then on top of that, the Sega CD had a video co-processor, more RAM, and an extra video co-processor. All of that stuff, and the games were still kind of wonky and the load times were still bad. The combination Super Nintendo and PlayStation system wouldn't have had any of those advantages at all. I think it would have been slow as hell, and it's possible that one of the reasons Nintendo didn't want to do it was because it would have made the Sega CD look good."

Take a look at Heckendorn's YouTube series for in-depth teardowns and hardware analyses.

ERIC LEMPEL

PlayStation 1

December 3, 1994 *(Japan)*
September 9, 1995 *(U.S.)*

Once the shock wore off, Kutaragi's resolve solidified. The Nintendo PlayStation may have been doomed, but there wasn't anything stopping Sony from going it alone. With the support of Sony president and chairman Norio Ohga, Kutaragi formed a team to develop what would become the PlayStation 1.

KUTARAGI: There was a fair amount of resistance within Sony for devoting precious resources toward the creation of "children's playthings." However, we were convinced that the technological and business prowess required to position ourselves at the apex of a new entertainment age existed within our walls. Hence, I went straight to Mr. Ohga, the president of Sony at that time, who possessed the necessary knowledge and experience in both the software and hardware fields. I believe his dream at the time was to build Sony's next big business domain from the ground up. At the executive meeting slated to decide the future of the PlayStation project, I voiced my passion to Mr. Ohga directly, to which he responded, "If you believe you can do it, then do it!" Those decisive words still echo in my mind like it was yesterday.

ERIC LEMPEL [Senior Vice President, Head of Global Marketing, Sony Interactive Entertainment]: I was at Acclaim one day in early 1994 when we got called into a room and they said Sony is entering the gaming business with a new gaming system. My first thought was, that was really interesting, because I'd seen failed attempts by other Japanese electronics companies, and I asked if there was a name for this thing. They said yes, it's called the Play Station – and they said it as two words – and I thought, "That's really ridiculous. I don't think that's ever going to work."

SONY
PlayStation
SONY

> *I chose a bright gray color that hadn't been used before, because I wanted the PlayStation to stand out when placed in front of the dark gray TV Sony planned to use. This TV was one I designed, called the ‘Kirara Basso.’”*
>
> **– TEIYU GOTO**
>
> [Belonged to Sony Merchandising Strategy New Business Group when designing the first PlayStation. Followed by being a part of the Creative Center, Master Designer, he currently is the President of Teiyu Goto, Inc.]

EVAN WELLS [President, Naughty Dog]: I think PlayStation is a totally reasonable name. It's stuck through five generations. It's like “fireplace.” It's straightforward – it's a place where you get fire. It's a station that you play on.

HOUSE: I think I wrote the English version of the first product press release for the announcement of the formation of Sony Computer Entertainment. It was a strange kind of hybrid thing, where I was involved in the project for a long period of time – at one point they probably tried to get me on board and I think my then-boss was having none of it. … I was peripherally involved and then joined what was still a very small, startup-style PlayStation team. When I went to tell [my boss] that I was not taking his offer and was going to join the PlayStation guys he just shouted at me. I remember the words ringing in my ears were, “It's a toy. It's just a toy. How could you go work on a toy?”

SHUHEI YOSHIDA [Head of Sony's Independent Creators Initiative]: When we started to reach out to Japanese third-party publishers/developers, in 1993, to disclose PlayStation and ask for their consideration to make games, we had two big hurdles to overcome. One was that Sony Corporation, as a consumer-electronics company, did not get trust from the video game industry that we understand the industry and could serve the needs of the publishers/developers effectively. … Another hurdle was real-time 3D graphics technology, the most signature feature of PlayStation, was not considered useful in video game development aside from racing games and shooters that were seen in arcades.

JIM RYAN [President and CEO, Sony Interactive Entertainment]: The cartridge-based model operated by the platform holders of the time was not one that was conducive to good functioning business. It required up-front payment for meeting with a massive cost of goods. The decision that Sony took quite early on in the planning process – to move to a much more friendly publishing model that embraced a disc-based physical medium – was a really important decision, and I think one where sitting on the other side of the fence and learning about publishing really made the decision easier to make.

HOUSE: The shift to disc was a game-changer, pun intended, for the industry.

MARK CERNY [Lead System Architect, PlayStation 5]: I'd been developing cartridge-based games, and the economics were just terrible. Cartridges cost so much to manufacture that profit margins for game publishers were pretty small and therefore it was difficult to spend too much on game development. Looking back, I'm guessing that if you as a gamer spent $50 on a game, maybe $1 was going into the actual creation of that game.

HOUSE: I remember it like it was yesterday. It was a conversation with the comms team and with Kutaragi-san, and he just laid out how a disc-based system was going to completely turn the industry on its head. But doing so by bringing real benefits for developers – lowering the risks, helping to manage inventory, not having to order your product three months in advance and take a bet on it. The benefits that it would bring to consumers, because it was going to bring game prices down and make games more affordable and therefore open up a whole bigger market. It was going to help retailers, because they could manage their business much better. I remember sitting there and saying, “I just heard a revolution, and this is absolutely going to work.” I was convinced just in that one conversation that we were absolutely onto something.

CERNY: PlayStation had a huge impact here as the first successful console based on optical media. CDs were so much cheaper than cartridges that the publisher economics were totally different; suddenly many dollars, or even 10 dollars could be spent on the actual creation of the game. That meant as the gamer the experiences got much richer, but it also meant the games industry could support many more creators! A lot us can trace our careers back to Ken Kutaragi's decision to use CD-ROMs for PlayStation games.

EVAN WELLS

SHUHEI YOSHIDA

JIM RYAN

MARK CERNY

> *The fact that you're dealing with the discs was a big step up; even when you start on a 3DO, the amount of storage you had was pretty cool. I don't know if that black stuff did anything special, but it looked cool.”*
>
> **– EVAN WELLS**
>
> [President, Naughty Dog]

> *I wanted to create a controller that both children and adults alike could use while focusing on the game. Before PlayStation, controllers were flat and required players use their fingers to both grip the controller and press the buttons. My design incorporates left and right grips that allow for a freer play style, letting players use the fingers that aren't supporting the controller to press the buttons. I kept the controller compact by determining the ideal button placement and making their size as small as possible. Instead of designing a controller that specifically fits adult hands, I created one that allows for different hand sizes according to the placement of the person's grip. With four buttons, you can control all the limbs on a person (e.g., for punching and kicking). The trigger buttons came from wanting people to play shooting games, and the grip design allowed for that. Nowadays, lots of companies – not just Sony Interactive Entertainment – create controllers with the players' grip in mind, the thought of which is humbling. The PlayStation controller with a grip is even used as an icon to represent computer games in general."*
>
> **– TEIYU GOTO**
>
> [Belonged to Sony Merchandising Strategy New Business Group when designing the first PlayStation. Followed by being a part of the Creative Center, Master Designer, he currently is the President of Teiyu Goto, Inc.]

L
R
SONY
PlayStation
SELECT
START

The PlayStation may not have been the first 32-bit console, the first disc-based console, or the first console to produce 3D graphics, but it managed to combine those elements in a commercially successful package. Even early in its lifespan, developers saw the console's potential.

TED PRICE

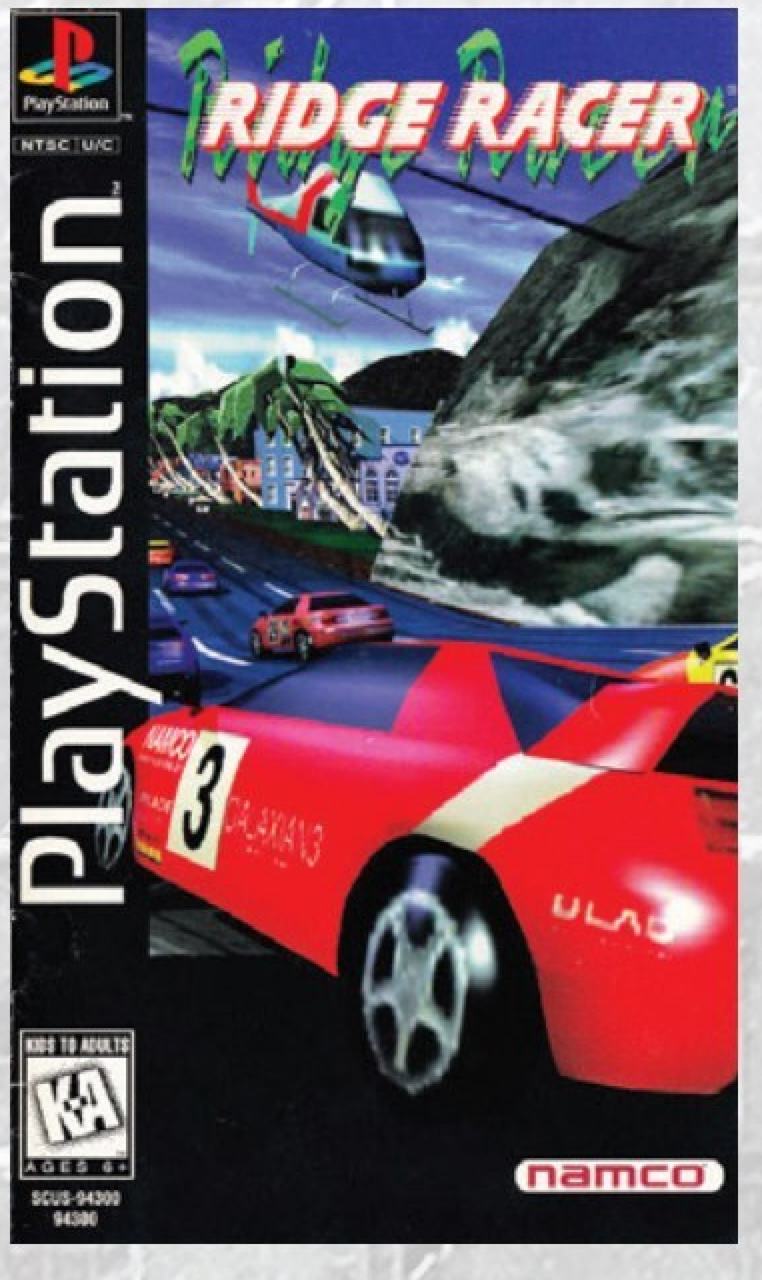
RYAN: I remember seeing the first demos for PlayStation, which were just light years ahead of anything on the 16-bit platforms. "Wow. This looks absolutely amazing."

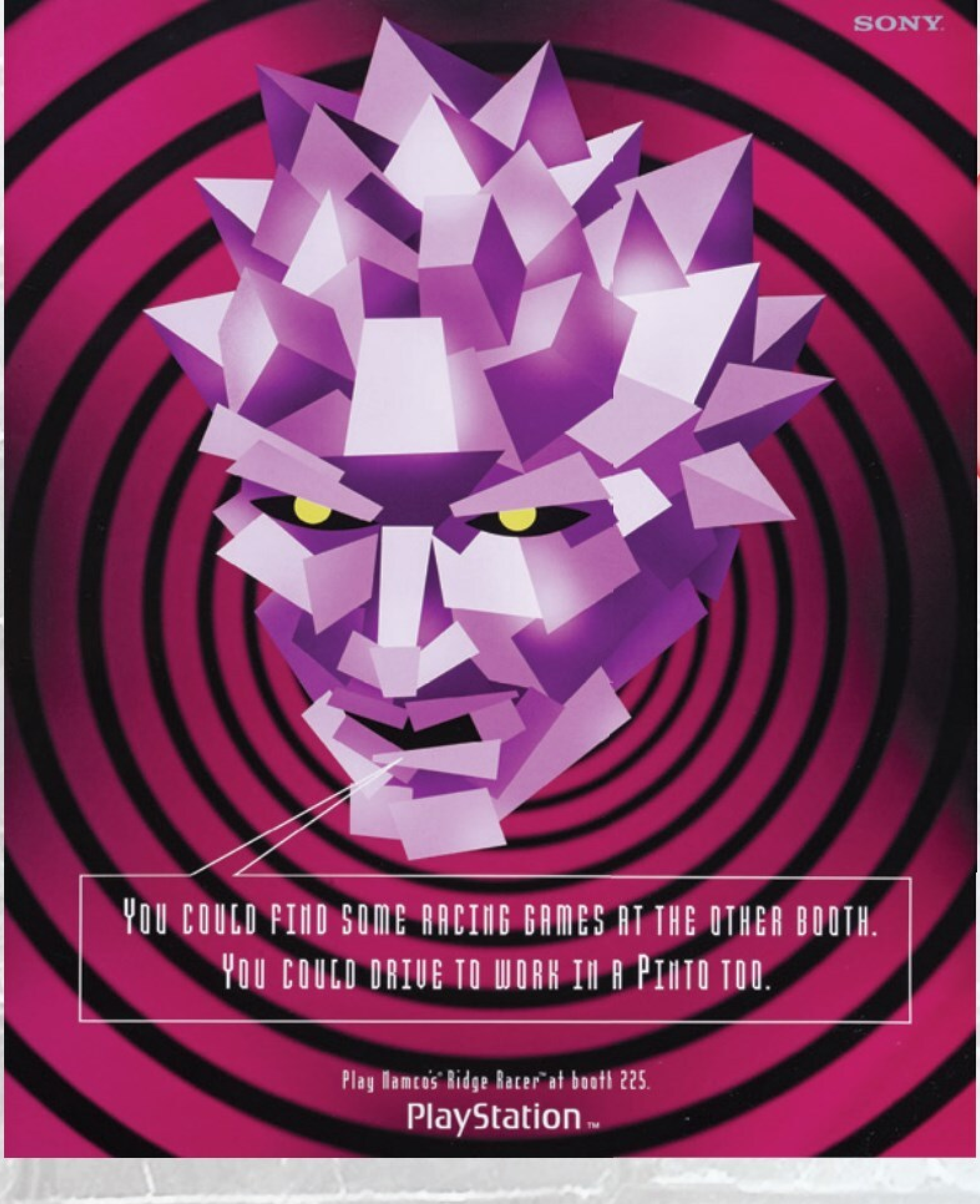
CERNY: Ken Kutaragi personally gave a talk and a demo to a number of game developers, me included, showing off the capabilities of the PlayStation. The demo that sticks out the most is the walking dinosaur; I thought it was really impressive.

TED PRICE [Founder and CEO, Insomniac Games]: Back in 1994, when Al Hastings and I had completed our first demo for our very first game, called Disruptor, we were driving around California, cold-calling publishers to show off the demo of the game, which we had recorded on a VHS tape. One of the visits that we made was to Sony, and Sony had a prototype PlayStation at that point, and they were showing off the dinosaur demo. It was a T-Rex, and at the time it was extremely high-poly, and it was animating on a black background – Al and I were just blown away by it. I thought to myself, A) that's pretty cool that Sony of all companies is getting into the games business, and B) wow, what they're able to do on the screen is something that we hadn't expected, just in terms of the number of polys that they were pushing and the fidelity of the textures and so on.

YOSHIDA: While we were struggling to get much interest from publishers, Sega showed off Virtua Fighter at an arcade show. That afternoon, we got a lot of calls from publishers wanting to know if they could use PlayStation to create something like Virtua Fighter. After that day, no one questioned the potential of real-time 3D graphics in video games.

WELLS: I was working at Crystal Dynamics, and we were heavily focused on the 3DO. I'd been working on Gex. Around that time, it was




SONY
You could find some racing games at the other booth.
You could drive to work in a Pinto too.
Play Namco's Ridge Racer™ at booth 225.
PlayStation™

probably close to the end of development I'd imagine, we got the first PlayStation dev kit in America because Mark Cerny was working at Crystal and through his connections he was able to get this shiny new fancy dev kit in. We were just blown away by the step up that it was from the 3DO. It was pretty exciting to have our hands on it first.

PRICE: PlayStation fully embraced 3D, and it was apparent from all of the games that were launched with the PlayStation and the games that came out within the next year. Creating 3D games was one of our goals. We'd grown up playing 2D games, but now we had this opportunity to build worlds that were much more believable and immersive.

KUTARAGI: Not long before the Japanese release date of December 3, 1994, I remember paying a visit to Namco, the developer behind the launch title Ridge Racer. What I saw mortified me. The cars weren't racing on tracks, or any form of surface for that matter – they were suspended in the air, driving in empty space. But, lo and behold, not only did the Namco developers finish the game in time, they even threw in Galaxian as a neat extra. Fast forward to the night before the launch; fervent game fans formed long, winding lines in front of game stores everywhere. And through the wee hours of the night, they waited for the moment of truth that was the PlayStation's official release. The sight brought tears to my eyes. It was then that I knew PlayStation had truly succeeded.

CERNY: When PlayStation arrived, there was an ongoing battle between the 3DO Interactive Multiplayer and the Atari Jaguar, neither one of which was selling more than a few million units. I thought PlayStation would do "well," but I never thought it would sell over a hundred million consoles.

×

After its launch, PlayStation inspired players to get into the industry, and also prodded existing developers to experiment and try new things.

HOUSE: These were back in the lovely days where if you sold 100,000 units at launch then that was considered a massive hit. In Japan, we did a whole set of commercials that was literally people shouting about 100,000 units sold. If we put it in today's context, it just tells us what a nascent market it was.

YOSHIDA: After the initial success of the launch in December '94 with Ridge Racer, the sales slowed towards the end of '95 and actually we were oversold by Sega Saturn in the crucial holiday sales season in Japan, as they had Virtua Fighter 2 and Devil Summoner as new releases.

HOUSE: I think one thing that gets lost – and I have the greatest respect for Nintendo and always have – but I think people lose sight of the fact that Nintendo at the time were an incredibly controlling platform structure. They would force developers to put their games through this exhaustive play-club thing that was really their quality control, and so Nintendo, number one, it's always been the case that Nintendo's own franchises have dominated sales on their own platforms. I think there was already a sense, certainly among Japanese developers, that there was a willingness or a yearning for a platform where they'd have a bigger market opportunity. I think over and above that, one of the things that Sony did and we did in contrast to that was to not have restrictions. It was to have very, very few restrictions. And to say, "Look, we're going to be a platform of developer creativity. You can release a game like Aquanauts Holiday, where you're basically just underwater going around and exploring." Is this really a game? I don't know, but it kind of feels nice to be under the sea. There's no way that would have found its way onto other platforms, but it's a good example of where PlayStation would say, "Sure, if you can find an audience out there, bring it to our console, bring it to our platform."

WELLS: It was the wild west. The kinds of games you could make were just so varied. Any concept was worth giving a shot, because you were just trying to find out what you could do with this new 3D technology. There were so many more games for niche audiences back then.

PRICE: It was exhilarating. It was great, because there weren't any rules, and we were discovering how to do this along the way. Because there were limitations to the hardware, we had to be efficient in terms of how we built our characters and our environments, and how we created collision for them, and occlusion, and all of the tricks that we had to use to make the game work.

BRIAN FLEMING

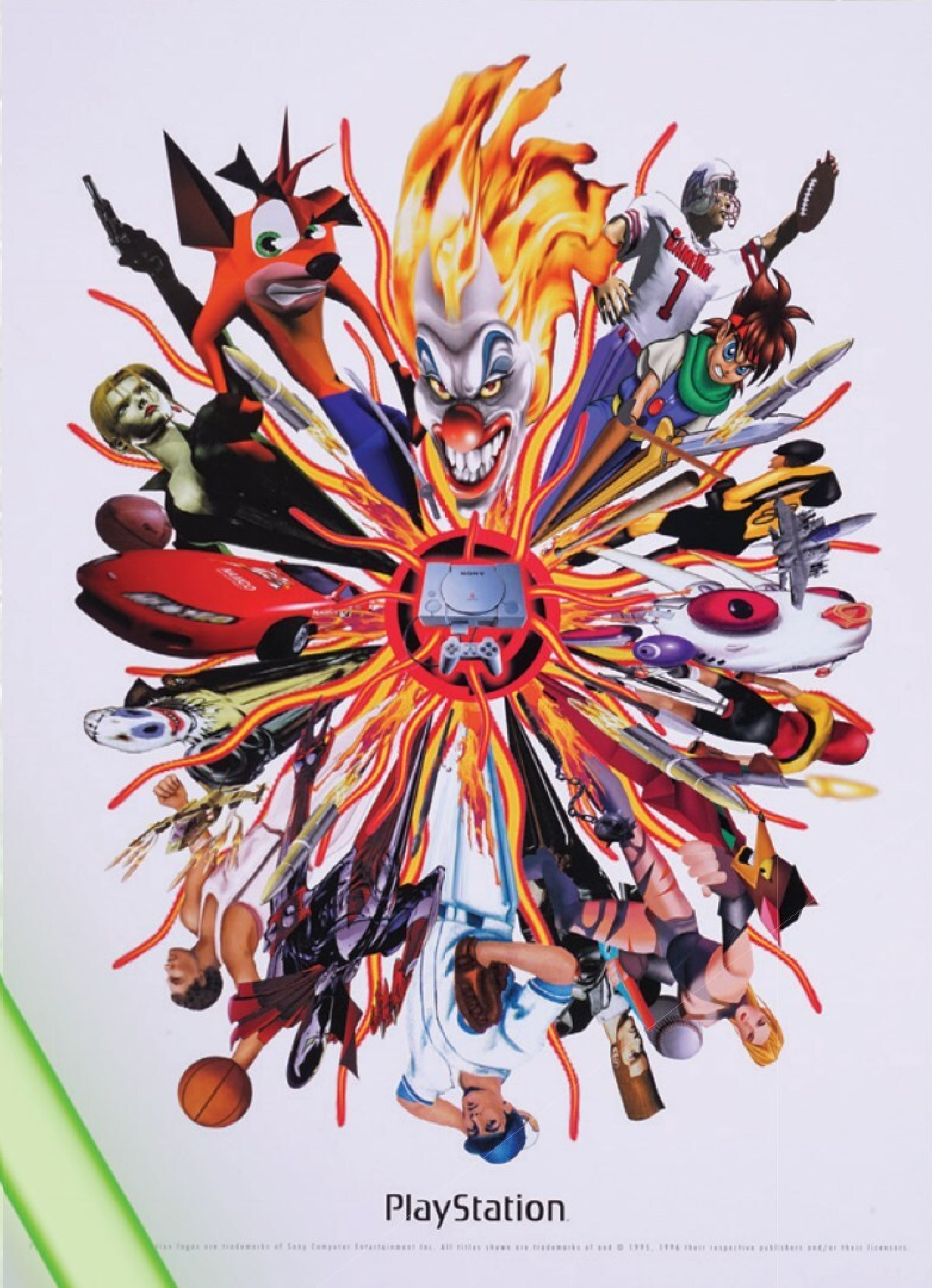
BRIAN FLEMING [Co-Founder and Producer, Sucker Punch Productions]: We were entertaining the idea – this is my partner Chris [Zimmerman] and Bruce [Oberg] – we were talking about starting a video game company, and when the U.S. launched it was actually not just the launch of the U.S. console, it was the launch of Abe's Oddysey that actually was the inciting incident for us. That was interesting because it was the first game that we played where we felt like our skills and talents, which were largely software engineering, would put us at a disadvantage versus titles like that. Because they were so cinematic and had such high production values and that was all because they had a CD-ROM to be able to host that much content. So our decision to both start a company and to go N64 was because, at the time, we thought it was the last console that would ever ship with cartridges, and we felt like our strengths as engineers would be more valuable on a cartridge-based system where you couldn't get your ass kicked by people who could out-art you, and that your cleverness and your engineering skills were at a premium on a cartridge, because you had so little space. We felt like if we were ever going to get into the business, it sort of felt to us like it was the last chance. Like, the N64 was our moment because we knew we would have to build our skills and strengths and our team to do that kind of production, but it would be a difficult thing to do all at the same time as you started a business. So, the N64 was our entry point kind of because of the PlayStation 1.

Early in its lifespan, PlayStation's marketing cultivated a sense of coolness, which was something that hadn't been a large part of games marketing. Rather than focus on family fun or friendly mascots, Sony's approach was a little edgier – thanks in no small part to a certain marsupial.

HOUSE: The U.S. operation at the time, prior to my joining it, actually wanted to rename the product. They thought "PlayStation" was too kiddy, it didn't fit the kind of marketing goals they wanted, and they wanted to call it the PSX. The senior management were having none of that, quite sensibly, there has to be a single brand around the world.

LEMPEL: It wasn't marketed like a consumer-electronics device; it was marketed like an entertainment product and really targeting a specific audience.

WELLS: I think it was the right combination of price point, power, and storage. It kind of hit all those right notes, and then I also am very impressed with how Sony and PlayStation positioned itself in sort of bringing games into the mainstream and making it a cool pastime, where before it seemed


PlayStation
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NAUGHTY DOG
UNIVERSAL
UNIVERSAL INTERACTIVE STUDIOS
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like more of a hobby of nerds or geeks or whatever. You had games like Wipeout, which was bringing this licensed music and making it very cool and sexy. It became super mainstream. I think it was marketed very well.

MICHIEL VAN DER LEEUW [Studio Director and Tech Director, Guerrilla]: I come from a PC background, where autoexec.bat and highloading your mouse driver to make space for a game and all that crap – there was an enormous amount of tinkering required just to get a game to run. On PlayStation, the games were way cooler – you had Wipeout with cool music … Underworld, and The Future Sound of London – and just had this hipness. The soundtrack to Wipeout was proper music, club music from the U.K. when they were still the capital of club music.

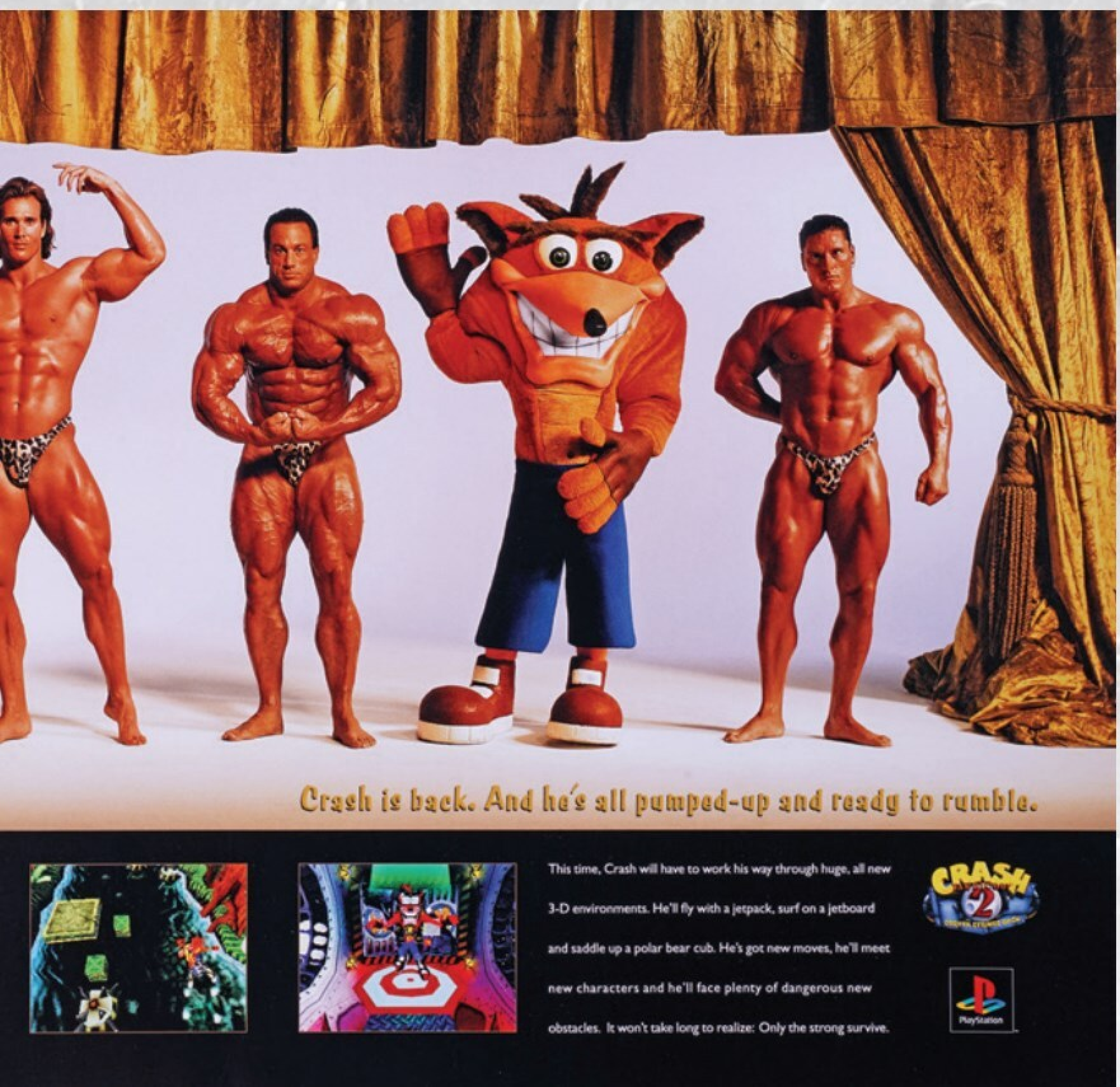
HOUSE: I think from the very start there was a real design flair and a sort of marketing flair around the organization that I think, sadly, I think Sony was starting to lose in other areas. But a lot of that skillset found its way into the early Sony Computer Entertainment.

WELLS: While we were developing Gex 2, we saw the first screenshots come out of Crash Bandicoot, and that blew our minds because the look that Naughty Dog was achieving and pulling off just had us totally scratching our heads, like, "Why does our game look like garbage, and their game looks so f---ing beautiful?" and that really threw us for a loop.

LEMPEL: One of my favorite ads as a consumer, which there's still probably not a year that's gone by where this doesn't surface in at least two or three internal meetings, would be the Crash Bandicoot going to Nintendo headquarters, uninvited, and poking fun and referencing some of their IP and saying, "Look at what I've got, we've got 3D," and this and that and being kicked out by the security guard, people loved that ad.

SIOBHAN REDDY [Studio Director, Media Molecule]: For me, my real interest in games really started with the PlayStation 1, and it started with Resident Evil. That is the point where I just went, "Oh my god, this is amazing," and it sort of eclipsed my love of film and theater and fashion and music and all that other stuff, and it became something that I wanted to actually try. I think it was a catalyst for me, working in the industry. … It was such an interesting time, and there were so many brilliant games – it was an explosion then, wasn't it?

HOUSE: Whether it was the content or the marketing, it all just came together. I think there was a sense early on that this was going to be not maybe the rocket ship that it would eventually turn out to be, but that it was going to be a success.


Crash is back. And he's all pumped-up and ready to rumble.
CRASH 2
PlayStation

This time, Crash will have to work his way through huge, all new 3-D environments. He'll fly with a jetpack, surf on a jetboard and saddle up a polar bear cub. He's got new moves, he'll meet new characters and he'll face plenty of dangerous new obstacles. It won't take long to realize: Only the strong survive.

DESIGNING A PLAYSTATION ICON

The PlayStation logo is one of the most enduring parts of the brand. We spoke with designer Manabu Sakamoto about what inspired his creation.

"Back then, one of the biggest features of the PlayStation was the 3D capability with polygons. So, the aim for the logo design, naturally, was to capture the '3D-ness.' I was, however, determined to avoid typical 3D representations such as adding thickness to the design elements. What I wanted to focus on is the sense of space with z-axis, something subtle, something more like an optical illusion. Teiyu Goto, who designed the PS consoles, was especially keen with the logo design as well and wanted it to reflect a 'fun' feeling.

"We wanted it to have a fun feeling, so the colorfulness was very important. I chose those primary colors because they are so simple so that you can describe them with the words that everybody knows: red, yellow, green, and blue. Green needed to be slightly adjusted to have better harmony, but such simplicity in communication, I believe is the key to a successful brand. The current logo is in monochrome, but it was also designed at the same time as a substitute in case the multi-color representation cannot be achieved.

"I've not seen them in person, so I don't know [if they're] real, but once I came across images of PlayStation logo tattoos. It's fun to see the logo on promotional items; T-shirts, jackets, mugs, and so on. I wish I could collect them all."

MICHIEL VAN DER LEEUW

SIOBHAN REDDY

MANABU SAKAMOTO

SONY
DVD
PS2
PlayStation 2
MEMORY

PlayStation 2
PlayStation.2
Unreal Tournament

PlayStation 2

March 4, 2000 *(Japan)*
October 26, 2000 *(U.S.)*

Sony found success with its PlayStation, building a brand and establishing a passionate user base within just a few short years. Kutaragi wasn't satisfied, and had already started working on the next step. The PlayStation 2 would bring obvious things like more processing power and graphical fidelity, but Kutaragi was looking ahead. He saw the potential in online gaming. The console wouldn't launch with that functionality, but in many ways the PS2 subtly laid the foundation for what would come years later.

HOUSE: As soon as the idea of backwards compatibility surfaces, there are two schools of thought. There's one that says it's going to slow down the launch or adoption of the next system. All of the research that we had at the time though said that it was going to do the reverse. By the way, this was perfect backwards compatibility, in that it was hardware-based. The chipset for PlayStation 1 had come down so far in price that you could put a PlayStation 1 – for free, effectively – in a PlayStation 2. Wow, weren't those wonderful days?

YOSHIDA: The original PlayStation was a ground-breaking hardware to have realtime 3D graphics capabilities for the first time in the history of video game console, so the focus needed to be on how to advance the performance and features of realtime 3D graphics in PS2. Also, DVD, the brand-new media to watch movies and TV shows, was just starting to get introduced to the market, which must have been a key component to leverage, as it offered much larger storage space for games, as well as to add an affordable consumer DVD player functionality.

RYAN: The timing on that was very serendipitous. It just caught the crest of the wave of DVD adoption as a format, and I think it was a contributory factor of importance. I think it was the success it was because it was a great gaming platform, but I think the functionality of the DVD player married to it being a great gaming platform made it a more complete entertainment offering.

HOUSE: And it was a really good DVD player. In true Ken Kutaragi fashion, it was really well done.

DVD
DVD
SONY

Having proven itself as a contender in the gaming space, PlayStation continued to attract new talented developers eager to get in on the action. The PlayStation 2's powerful new hardware opened new possibilities along the way.

HOUSE: I think we had the benefit of having already established good IP at that time, because that was another major challenge in the original PlayStation. Sony had no first-party games or IP history, and that really took time. Even by the time PlayStation 2 rolled around, there was a sense that we had credibility with the development community and with publishers we had a track record of success, so even though I think we joked that the launch title from first-party was a firework game for PlayStation 2 [Fantavision], you could lean on the strength of third-party at this point because they were prepared to swing their resources pretty heavily behind the platform.

WELLS: I remember we had to drive to the airport to pick up a special package that was shipped in because [the PS2] was considered a supercomputer and we had to practically smuggle it through customs to get our hands on it in the early days. That was the first

PlayStation.2

ANGIE SMETS

time we sat down and started working with it. We read the specs and we kind of were incredulous. It was like, “Really? Is it really going to be able to do that?” And then when we started to work with it, at first the framerate wasn’t great, but it was able to display a ridiculous number of polygons and we saw the potential. That’s where our ideas for Jak and Daxter started.

VAN DER LEEUW: We had a concept, and it changed a little bit into something I think was called Colonial Marines, working title. And we had this bold idea, like, “We should go to PlayStation,” because that was the place to be. There were not many shooters on consoles. PlayStation 2 was announced or rumored, so we said we have to do this for PlayStation. And we drank to that and we started making a demo. The demo was completely over the top. It ran on an early Nvidia 256 that ran on five frames a second; we were cramming as much graphical detail and the promise of a beautiful game and these super realistic graphics because the PlayStation 2 was going to be the fastest machine in the world.

ANGIE SMETS [Studio Director and Executive Producer, Guerrilla]: If you now look at it, it’s pretty hilarious, but at the time this was benchmark graphics based on what we thought was probably going to be possible on PlayStation 2, but we had no clue – we were just hoping it would be because the specs weren’t even announced. Sony got really excited about the demo.

WELLS: We wanted to tell more interesting stories. We wanted to have games with cutscenes that had longer sequences of dialogue and back-and-forth. Certainly, we were just scratching the surface of that with the Crash games, and we took advantage of the interstitials between levels to render these large versions of the characters, and in some cases it would just be their heads so we could put all of the polygons into their face rather than having to display their bodies. We were limited to how many characters you could have in one scene, so by the time we were done with Crash Team Racing we were pretty excited to be moving on to the new hardware that we’d already had access to for a while, and realized it was a quantum leap forward. We were just shocked by what we were presented with.

PRICE: On the PlayStation 1 games, we were very limited with the number of joints that we could use with each character. In Ratchet & Clank, all of a sudden we could create much more believable facial expressions, more believable deformations in our characters, which is really important because Ratchet & Clank was a cartoony game, and that squash and stretch was the key. We definitely couldn’t have done that on PlayStation 1, because it required a lot more joints and sophisticated animation to play in real time.

> *I remember a meeting where I asked about the rotating logo. I’m a branding guy! I think I remember correctly where there was a smug product-planning person who said, ‘Oh yes, we thought of that,’ and then showed this sort of tweak around the logo and very proudly showed that off. Again, it was just another example of where Sony had within this little startup, had managed to draft in some real design and product-planning talent from within the broader organization.”*
>
> **– ANDREW HOUSE**
>
> [Former President & CEO, Sony Interactive Entertainment]

PS2
PlayStation 2
SONY

The PlayStation 2 is the most successful console of all time, but that doesn't mean that everything went off without a hitch. Product shortages and slow adoption rates in Europe created headaches early on in the console's lifespan.

HOUSE: One of the worst telephone calls that I ever had to make was to call every publisher on the platform onto a conference call, I think literally weeks before launch, and tell them that production had been halved, and that we were getting half of what we thought we were in terms of the allocation, because of some component issue that I can't recall right now. I think it was a drive-based issue. I've never heard a more silent call in my life, where nobody would say a word.

RYAN: Without question, it's the most successful console ever. But the first year in Europe, we couldn't sell it. I remember at the time, the dollar was really, really strong and the European currencies – there was no euro at that time – were consistently very weak. We were grappling with price points of thousands upon thousands of lira, hundreds upon hundreds of pesetas, and Deutschmarks and Swiss Francs, and the thing was, we were really expensive in Europe. We just couldn't sell it. I remember at Sony the Americans, our colleagues at the time, were having massive success and the Europeans were having miserable results and Mr. Kutaragi was … less than impressed by our performance, and he told us in no uncertain terms. I remember very vividly, GT 3, which was the first Gran Turismo game on PS2, came along, and we did a bundle with PS2 that came in a beautiful red box, and it just caught the public imagination and away we went.

YAMAUCHI: Every Gran Turismo is [important], but there was never any time to wallow in the victory or results after their release. I was always concerned with, "We couldn't do this," or "That wasn't enough," and we started running towards our next objective. But when I was called to a management meeting and I reported the achievements of GT 3, everyone within SCE management gave me a big applause, and that was the first time I realized, "Ahh I was able to contribute something to PlayStation," and I remember being very happy about that.

RYAN: The story has a happy ending, because Europe enjoyed every bit of success that the U.S. had initially, it just took us longer. But it was very difficult at the beginning, and people tend to forget that. Sometimes it doesn't come overnight, it needs to be earned the hard way.

SHADOW OF THE COLOSSUS
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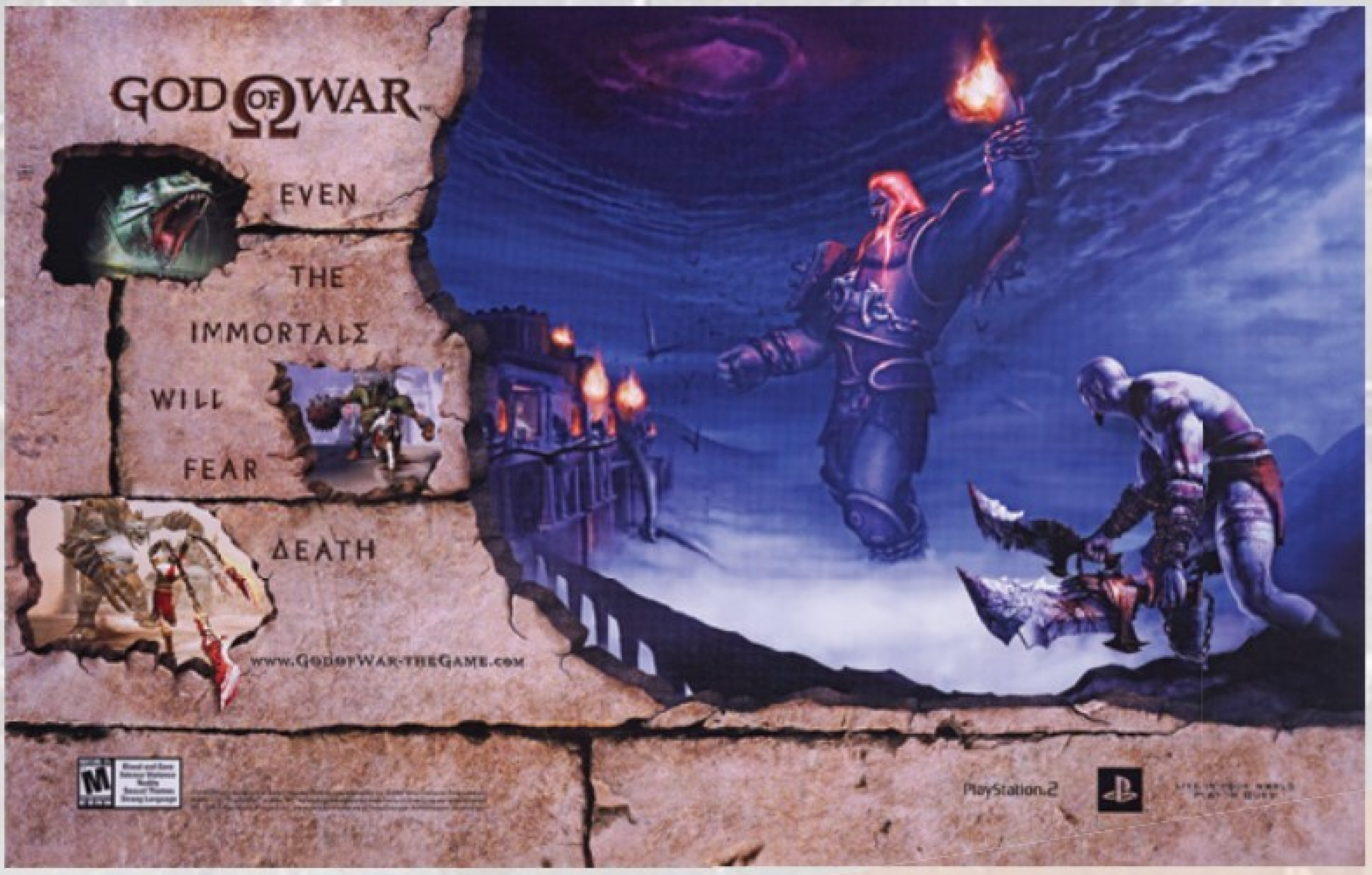
PlayStation.2
LIVE IN YOUR WORLD PLAY IN OURS

Lightning Uppercut
Burning Knuckle
Throw and Destroy
Atomic Hook
THESE SEATS MUST BE VACATED FOR SENIORS AND DISABLED PERSONS
YOU CAN TURN IT ON BUT YOU CAN'T TURN IT OFF.
PS2


GOD OF WAR
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- 27 devastating weapons.
- Advanced AI opponents that react to your every move.
- Competitive or collaborative multiplayer and online modes for up to 16 players.

Gran Turismo 3

SONY
HDD
PlayStation 2

PlayStation 2 network adapter

Game development is in an inherently challenging task, but early tools and questionable documentation didn't make it any easier. Sony would smooth things out later on, but there was a definite culture clash between Japan and the rest of the world in the early days of PlayStation.

VAN DER LEEUW: There was this whole thing where basically there was an implicit flowchart about what you had to do [with memory cards]. If you, at any moment, inserted a card and it was corrupt, you had to offer the ability to format it there. But also you had to be able to rip it out at any moment. Basically, all the rules in the PS2 there was a certain way you had to do it. And we kept fighting bugs that came out of it. I think Angie [Smets], who was a designer at the time, drew a flowchart of how to implement it. It was like, why didn't you give us this flowchart, because everybody has to go through it?

SMETS: I remember that, with the two memory-card slots and about a zillion options for how things could go wrong. And then the key was in English, but you couldn't make any sense out of it.

VAN DER LEEUW: It was very Japanese. … Sony from back then to Sony now is so different. It was bizarre. It was like the Japanese made a console with a bunch of hardware specs and they threw it over the wall to Europe and then it just had to be implemented here. But the communication between America, Europe, and Japan was really bad. It was a Japanese product that was sold in Europe and America, but it wasn't a very unified thing yet in those early days.

PlayStation 2
8MB
MEMORY CARD
MagicGate
SONY

MASAYASU ITO

FLEMING: The greatest terror ever is that your game is going to erase someone's memory card. Literally, the most terrifying thing that could ever happen. To create the icon for that little save game, there was a bespoke polygonal format with shaders that you had to use, and I'm 90 percent sure that Bruce [Oberg], one of the founders, had to do the conversion of the model into the correct format for this, and it was totally chaotically insane. The model was some godforsaken … what I remember is that it was crazy, and I forget what flavor of crazy it was. But I remember that just the data conversion of the polygons into that format was like a research project.

WELLS: The memory card system was a nightmare to work with, I'll tell you that much. You were super limited with the resolution and you had to be very, very creative to get something that looked good. It was always something you'd do at the very end, when you were in crunch time anyway, so it definitely was always stressful to get it done. Compared to the overall development of the game, it was a small slice of it, but it was something that you definitely wanted to make sure that you gave the right attention to.

△

PlayStation 2 was the first Sony console to go online, giving players a chance to battle enemies in SOCOM or go on adventures in games like Final Fantasy XI. The console didn't launch with built-in networking support, but players could purchase a peripheral that would allow them to access network connections.

MASAYASU ITO [Executive Vice President, Hardware Engineering and Operation, Sony Interactive Entertainment]: Back then, our office was located in a place called Aoyama, which was separate from the headquarters' office. In a way, we were separate from the headquarters, and also our project required a very high degree of confidentiality, so it was kept strictly confidential. We didn't even report to the headquarters what we were doing, so I think we were a group that was looked upon or regarded as a strange, weird group with everybody else wondering what we were doing.

LEMPEL: When I joined the company prior to the PlayStation 2 launch, back then, it was all confidential. There was the idea that the console at some point will be connected, and it will be some idea of a community that will allow you to play against other gamers from the comfort of your home and potentially get new content. If you think about that in the year 2000, a lot of people couldn't quite grasp that concept. I was part of a small team that was given that information and it sounds like a brilliant future, and I was really excited to see it happening. And that vision came from Ken Kutaragi.

RYAN: I think he foresaw the network era and was talking about the network era many, many years before it became reality. But also many years before most people started to imagine it. He talked about this before we could really comprehend what he was saying.

ITO: Back then, Mr. Kutaragi assumed and foresaw the internet connection to the network when that console was designed, so the idea was incorporated into its design. The actual connection to the network, the test was not conducted prior to the launch, and therefore what we had to do was actually connect the console to the network and then go through the process of commercialization.

LEMPEL: We had the network adapter that you attached to the back of your PlayStation 2 console and you

PlayStation
ONLINE
ONLINE
SOCOM II
GRAN TURISMO 4
Syphon Filter
THE OMEGA STRAIN

screwed it in with a nickel – and that was actually in the instructions, get a nickel, because that was the tool that did well.

ITO: The monetary value was higher in Japan than in the U.S. – it was a 500 yen coin!

PRICE: We took advantage of the PlayStation 2's online capabilities when we released Ratchet & Clank: Up Your Arsenal. It was, we thought, one of the first, if not the first, online platformers. We had a lot of fun making the multiplayer modes, and I think it was fairly popular, but it was fairly early, too.

SMETS: Do you remember trying to get online for the first time?

VAN DER LEEUW: Oh yeah. Great.

SMETS: I think you had to send paper through snail mail so you could get the account activated. It seems like it was 100 years ago, but it wasn't really that long ago. It's come a long way.

ITO: At the time, since I had just moved to SCE, I thought I had to go through a lot of troubles. Looking back at what was waiting for me from that period onward, leading to now, and the various projects and experiences that I had to go through, compared to that, probably it wasn't that stressful.

> *Ken Kutaragi was notably reluctant about getting into the portable-gaming market. I think there was a lot of arm-twisting that took place from folks like myself from the marketing and sales side of the organization, and one of the reasons I think was that he had genuinely foreseen the rise of smartphones before anyone had heard about the iPhone. I remember him talking about there was going to be a convergence between all forms of media and entertainment into a single communications device. With that in mind, I think he was therefore skeptical about a dedicated handheld market. But that didn't stop us from having some really good success with PSP at the time, especially in the Japanese market."*
>
> **– ANDREW HOUSE**
>
> [Former President & CEO, Sony Interactive Entertainment]

SONY
HOME
VOL
PSP
SELECT
START
POWER
HOLD

○

PlayStation 3

November 11, 2006 *(Japan)*
November 17, 2006 *(U.S.)*

After the success of PlayStation 2, it would have been reasonable to assume that the upward trajectory would continue. Unfortunately for Sony, the PlayStation 3 marked one of the toughest times for the company. Kutaragi showed off the console at E3 2005, a showing that was notable for the system's power, abundance of ports (two HDMI inputs and a trio of Ethernet connections), and odd boomerang-shaped controller. The console was powered by a proprietary IBM-developed Cell processor, which promised to give developers an unprecedented amount of processing power.

A year later, much had changed. The Cell processor and other components proved to be expensive, which led to the announcement at E3 2006 that it would have two versions – one costing $500, and another priced at $600. It was a shocking announcement, accompanied by a press conference that spawned meme-worthy moments such as Kaz Hirai's infamous "Ridge Racer" and "Hit the weak spot for massive damage" lines. The price did indeed prove to be an obstacle when the consoles launched in November, but that was far from the only problem the PS3 faced.

LEMPEL: Under strict NDA I was being told, "Here's what [PlayStation 2] is going to do," but then there was also this hint about the vision for what would be the next console. We weren't even out with the PS2 yet, and I believe Kutaragi-san was already thinking about what's next after that.

RYAN: Ken is a genius. There's no two ways about that. When you work for that sort of a person, it's kind of scary when you watch their brain working in ways that you can't really comprehend or follow. It doesn't happen often, but it's scary and exhilarating.

PRICE: I was fortunate enough to spend some time with [Kutaragi] in Japan and went to dinner with him and got to hear his philosophy on the PlayStation 3 and his vision for how PlayStation 3 could change the world, not just for games, but online computing. I think he was way ahead of his time in terms of massively parallel computing. To me, it was really, really cool for an industry icon like Ken Kutaragi to think about a gaming platform as a device that could make the world better. What I remember in particular was the Folding program, which as a PlayStation 3 player you could sign up and have your PlayStation 3 help work on folding proteins to assist in scientific endeavors. That was really cool, and it was an altruistic angle for the PlayStation 3.

LEMPEL: There were other products at the time. We were right at the tail end of the Dreamcast's life cycle, which could go online, but this was a much deeper vision, a much more robust vision about where this could go.

ITO: Among various projects and processes I think it was the toughest challenge. Having said that, in the end it was the most rewarding. In the design process there were so many challenges, and they surfaced one after the other. We had to keep on overcoming those challenges, so it was very tough.

SONY
PLAYSTATION 3
SONY
SELECT
START

PLAYSTATION 3

PLAYSTATION 3

COMPOSING PLAYSTATION'S STARTUP SOUNDS

Every version of PlayStation hardware has booted up with musical accompaniment. Chances are, you've heard these tunes thousands of times. It's so memorable that Naughty Dog added the PS1 startup sequence in one of Uncharted 4's memorable moments. We spoke with Takafumi Fujisawa, the composer of the original startup sound, to learn a bit more about his work and the work that his audio team produced in other PlayStation consoles.

"The function of this sound is to tell the user that the hardware is running like it is supposed to, and that the disc has successfully been read. To add, the swooshing reverse sound [in the PlayStation 1 sequence] is designed so that it can go into loop if the disc couldn't be read, and we can understand if something went wrong.

"I thought of the structure, selected the tones, and gathered the instruments in two weeks, and the studio work was done essentially in two days. I kept thinking from the start that I wanted the sound image to be something exciting, like that feeling when you walk into a cinema. I really wanted to communicate and reinforce that something fun is going to happen.

"When we went into PlayStation 2, the sound team had grown to a significant size, so I decided to create a concept and we had a team contest. I finalized the final two options, and made sure that the perfect 4th chords were emphasized as the key feature of the series. Kutaragi-san briefed us with the concept that was beyond our image, like a monolith floating in space with the Earth in the background. I used the perfect 4th chords with stable harmony to express simple strength and the image of landing somewhere from space.

"I was focusing on my duties as the development manager by PlayStation 3, so the sound was created by my junior staff, but I think that the concept is great that the sound features the orchestra tuning up to express that something is starting."

SONY

COMPUTER
ENTERTAINMENT ™

PLAY BEYOND

PLAY BEYOND

Developers had varying amounts of difficulty adjusting to the PS3's Cell processor. Because of its unusual architecture, it proved to be particularly challenging when developing multiplatform games.

PRICE: I know that it was more challenging than the PlayStation 1 to PlayStation 2 transition; however, we had a lot of heads-up from Sony and we were privileged to attend various technical briefings and understand the Cell architecture in-depth. And because we were only working on the PlayStation platforms at the time, we could put all of our focus into preparing for the PlayStation 3, which we did. We also were in the unique position of being able to create a launch title for the PlayStation 3, which meant that we worked very closely with Mark Cerny and the hardware team to ensure that Resistance, which is the title we were working on, could run well on the PlayStation 3.

YAMAUCHI: The Cell architecture was great in theory, but actually making use of it and drawing out its peak performance involved a lot of complex work. It was high-performance, but sensitive. So when I look back on the days working on Gran Turismo on the PS3, I do remember it was difficult.

VAN DER LEEUW: Even desktop chips nowadays, the fastest Intel stuff you can buy is not by far as powerful as the Cell CPU, but it's very difficult to get power out of the Cell. I think it was ahead of its age, because it was a little bit more like how GPUs work nowadays, but it was maybe not balanced nicely and it was too hard to use. It overshot a little bit in power and undershot in usability, but it was definitely visionary.

YOSHIDA: PS3 had a very peculiar hardware architecture. The video game engineer had to spend months to get a single piece of image to be displayed on TV. Even though the Cell processor was a monster chip with an amazing performance, we learned that the peak performance is not as important as the ease of development for most of the developers.

VAN DER LEEUW: I would personally say the PlayStation 2 was way harder. But the PlayStation 3 had such a bucketload of power. Making use of it and really getting performance out of the PS3 was hard, because you had all the SPUs and the power was not easy to unlock. You had to write a lot of special-case code. Once we were done and we got all the physics stuff and the ragdolls and there was so much stuff we did, it was good, but everything took a long time. And you need quite a skilled team to do it.

FLEMING: I don't think it was particularly difficult engineering; you didn't need this mythical 100x programmer genius. I think the thing that was special about it was you had to decide that you were willing to put your data into the formats that were convenient to the hardware rather than convenient to the people making the game.

WELLS: The PS3 with its Cell processor was challenging to develop for but, once you tapped into its power, it was quite a workhorse. It allowed us to take the leap from developing cartoony, fantastic-style games to tackling real-world, more photo-real rendering and animation. It was on the PS3 that we really found our groove of giving equal importance to both narrative and gameplay and matching the character's emotional state with what the player was experiencing at any given moment. The technology had finally reached the point where we could achieve something as emotional as the opening 20 minutes of The Last of Us that regularly moves players to tears.

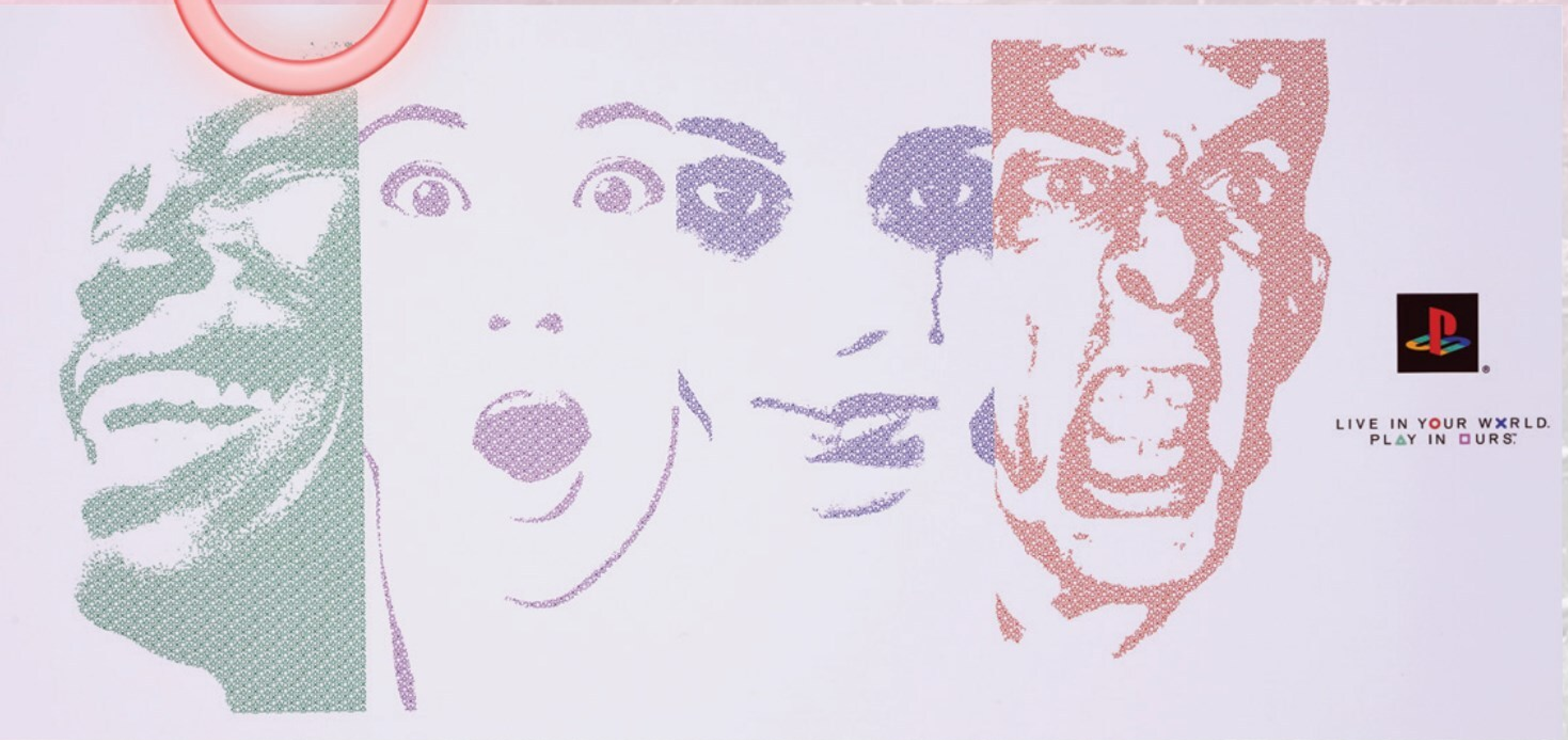
The PS3's price proved to be a major obstacle for Sony, considering its closest competition, the Xbox 360, was several hundred dollars cheaper. Sony lost money with every console it sold, and its engineers were told in no uncertain terms to come up with cost-cutting solutions.

YOSHIDA: PS3 was one of the very first consumer Blu-ray video players in the market, so the initial days of the PS3 manufacturing was limited by the number of the Blu-ray drives supplied by Sony. Cost of goods was very expensive at that time, due to the costs of the Cell processor and Blu-ray drive.

ITO: There was a strong order and demand coming from Mr. Kutaragi to reduce the cost. However, the PS3 incorporated a wide range of the most advanced technology, which means that it was not easy to reduce the cost. Whenever we tried to do something about it, everything was very, very tough. One experience I recall vividly is because we were told to reduce the cost constantly, and repeatedly, I decided to come up with intentionally a very cheap looking and cheap prototype satisfying the cost aspect and showed the prototype to Mr. Kutaragi. As soon as Mr. Kutaragi saw it, he threw that on the floor and broke it into pieces. I was surprised, but then I realized that what Mr. Kutaragi tried to stress is that even though it may be difficult, we should never come up with anything that looks cheap. The PS console is the epitome of all the advanced technology, so the PS console should give the impression that it incorporates all the technology and is worthy of showing that. That was a very important lesson that Mr. Kutaragi gave to me, and that has been the leading pillar of my thinking in design concepts and ideas.

RYAN: Despite starting with a horribly uncompetitive price point, we did end up in a position of comparative parity. In all the years I've been doing this, I don't think I've worked harder or found it more difficult than on that particular cycle. It really was challenging.

PlayStation 3 slim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With PlayStation 3, Sony was investing in online in a major way. The PlayStation Network was a fundamental part of the PS3 experience, ushering in a new connected age. Customers could download games, updates, and DLC from their homes – and even add new functionality to their consoles, like having the ability to download software in the background or collect trophies in their games.

LEMPEL: It took some time. It was something entirely new to the majority of our consumers. There were a lot of people who used those PlayStation 2 network adapters, but there were also a ton of people who hadn't. Now I've got a console that would benefit from being connected, so we had to educate them on the benefits of being connected – and it took some time.

PRICE: It's been an incredible boon for players, having patches and DLC automatically install is very, very convenient. I think also with the rise of network speeds digital is now outpacing physical distribution, which is, from a developer's perspective and I think a publisher's perspective, is a real win.

LEMPEL: Really, one of the things that excited me so much back then – and that I really had such passion for – was the idea of firmware updates. Today, it sounds silly because it's so common to have updates, but we were one of the first devices where we could truly say after you buy this device and take it home, it's going to get better. It's going to do more than the day you bought it.

YOSHIDA: PS3 had a lot of great features, but not many people used them as it was hard to discover some of the advanced features. Features like video chat, super-audio CD, and other OS installation. We learned that making features accessible to players will truly make the features appreciated and used by the players. We put "ease of use" as a key pillar to develop the PlayStation 4.

SONY
5
Welcome Park
PS Store
Browser
Trophies
Friends
Messages
Party
PS4 Link
Photos
Parental Controls
SELECT
START
PS VITA

> *PlayStation Vita was brilliant in many ways, and the actual gaming experience was great, but clearly it's a business that we're no longer in now."*
>
> **– JIM RYAN**
>
> [President and CEO, Sony Interactive Entertainment]

PlayStation 4

November 15, 2013 *(U.S.)*
February 22, 2014 *(Japan)*

Following the launch of the PlayStation 3, Ken Kutaragi's role within Sony changed. His titles shifted over the years, but the biggest change to PlayStation was that he didn't have a planning role in designing the PlayStation 4. Sony was able to gain ground in the marketplace in the last part of the PS3's lifespan, thanks in no small part to exclusives including Gran Turismo and The Last of Us, but the overall experience was one that the company wasn't keen to repeat. In many ways, the PlayStation 4 was designed as a direct response to the PlayStation 3's failed potential.

HOUSE: I think for me, a critical theme was kind of a renaissance. Following a ton of issues around PlayStation 3, the goal for me was to take the company back to the core values that had underpinned success. Being about developer creativity. Being developer-friendly in its broadest sense. Offering as far as possible a good value for money and being aggressive in that area. But also being a kind of creative palette upon which people could launch new franchises and new IP, whether it was first-party, which I think has happened all the way through the course of the console's lifecycle, and that folks should be really proud of, but also for third-party publishers as well. I think, by and large, we managed to achieve those goals.

LEMPEL: What was great about PlayStation 4 was we had a number of years of experience on the network and managing a really great community and of course running a store. We took all of those learnings and made massive improvements on everything. It was a lot of the things we would have hoped we would have known going into PS3 but we just wouldn't know. We had to learn a lot.

ITO: Because PS3 incurred a sizeable loss from Sony Computer Entertainment, when it came to PS4 we made a point of generating profit from the very beginning. At that time, I took a great lesson about the power of the PlayStation product. Because we should generate profit, if we come out with anything cheap-looking, then it's not a PlayStation. The key point was offering an affordable price to customers that's still profitable to our company but never cheap-looking. That is a very important point that we always kept in our minds based on what I learned from my experiences with the PS3 before.

VAN DER LEEUW: I remember at one point Mark Cerny pulled me aside at [a conference] and I remember having these meetings in the IT room in the office – because that's where I could close the door and it was five or six o'clock and everyone in the Amsterdam office was drinking – and I was sitting in a one-closet room with the door shut with a TV on with a presentation with early PlayStation 4 specs – which were completely different than they are now! We can never talk about that machine, because it's buried of course, but it was really interesting seeing how a machine develops and also seeing someone like Mark Cerny at work and how a machine is balanced out and how much input from the different games goes into that. From opinions to measurements to running things on simulators to experiments – all this stuff that goes on until something hits the silicon. It's a really cool process.

PRICE: For us, it was great. Mark Cerny was even more heavily involved with the hardware at this point, and we spoke at length to Mark about what the PlayStation 4's hardware architecture would be like. It seemed like Sony had really listened to developers during the PlayStation 3 era and wanted to make sure that it was going to be much easier for developers to take their technology and bring it over to PlayStation 4 and improve it. That was absolutely true.

ITO: For designing the controller for PS4, we changed the process of designing. Up until then, the controller development was done in Japan by only the Japanese engineers, but for the PS4 onward we've called on our colleagues and engineers in the United States, Europe, and Japan and formed a team to discuss what sort of controllers would reflect our path. At that time, in our team an American engineer came up with this idea of putting a share button on the controller, and I really think that having a share button on the controller is a really unique, imaginative idea. It is a unique function, the share button is, and it really changed the way development and the design was done with controllers. The global discussion allowed the controller to change.

REDDY: The share button. We love that share button. The share button, we use that in so many different ways. Obviously, internally, we use it to share things with each other all of the time throughout development. It just became an amazing development tool, where instead of actually having to go through the faff of everybody having video cards, we were suddenly able to share bugs more easily, we were able to share funny things with each other more easily, share progress more easily. … It's just been a really amazing way of seeing what people are doing off the platform.

RYAN: I think we're getting better as a company at involving different stakeholders earlier in the process.

VAN DER LEEUW: There's a very healthy, intense, fact-based discussion about what should be in there. I think the hardware-development team is a really open dialogue now, and there's a lot of back-and-forth about questions and ideas. I think many people contribute.

FLEMING: One of the things that I really appreciated that changed on the PS4 was during the boot sequences of games, you had all these warnings, these system-level warnings about the Move controller and all the safety warnings. It really, dramatically elongated the boot-sequence time, so we were so grateful when you finally saw the migration of those very important disclaimer warnings migrate into the OS just so that customers could get into the games quicker. I always used to send these mails to the legal department about the number of people who saw one of these screens today times the number of seconds that it took, and effectively how many lives were being lost to these screens that we could clearly do on a per account basis, and get them to acknowledge it and then it would move away.

PlayStation 4 Pro

* * *

Sony did something unusual midway through the PlayStation 4's lifespan: The company developed an upgraded version of the system, the PlayStation 4 Pro. This new console added support for HDR lighting and 4K displays.

VAN DER LEEUW: We were involved when it was being designed and we were looking at the components. It was very much like, "Is this something we can do, that gives the possibility of doing 4K in HDR at an affordable price? Wouldn't that be great?" In the beginning, we were not sure if that would be possible or if 4K was really worth it, because at that point 1080p was fine, and it was a very high resolution compared to 720p. For the first time we saw it on a massive Sony TV a prototype version of Shadowfall running on it, and it was like, "Wow, it really does make a difference." But we never thought that could be done on consumer hardware levels.

SMETS: I remember making phone calls with companies asking if there was any capturing equipment, and they were like, "We're sorry, ma'am, but that does not exist."

FLEMING: In the case of 4K and HDR, in the same way that when they were working on the PS5 they did some collaborations with Insomniac using the Spider-Man codebase, we were that codebase on much of the PS4 Pro. We just provided them the compileable code and let them hack on it for a little while, which is useful for everybody.

ITO: Indeed, in the past, the cycle for a new platform was 7 to 10 years, but in view of the very rapid development and evolution of technology, it's really a six to seven year platform cycle.

GREATNESS AWAITS™

Then we cannot fully catch up with the rapid development of the technology, therefore our thinking is that as far as a platform is concerned for the PS5, it's a cycle of maybe six to seven years. But doing that, a platform lifecycle, we should be able to change the hardware itself and try to incorporate advancements in technology. That was the thinking behind it, and the test case of that thinking was the PS4 Pro that launched in the midway of the PS4 launch cycle.

> *"The neat thing we did in Infamous Second Son was that [motion-controlled] spray-painting. I think that was more of a skunkworks project, where we really wanted to try something with spray-painting, and the guy who worked on it must have tried 30 different paradigms. All those things, it wasn't like Sony was like, 'Please do this.' In fact, there was a little bit of politics in terms of asking people to shake the controller, where some of the legal people were a little concerned that it might incur liability because there was no hand strap. I believe the original prompt was, 'Shake the controller,' and that didn't pass legal muster because they felt that someone was going to blow their TV up or something wild. We changed it to 'Rattle,' because it was more gentle, but that was the level of detail that you get into when you're trying to get your title cleared at times."*
>
> **– BRIAN FLEMING**
>
> [Co-Founder and Producer, Sucker Punch Productions]

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PlayStation 4 seems to have righted the ship, bringing big-name exclusives to the platform, including Uncharted 4 and God of War. Sony recently announced the PlayStation 5, a console that adds a solid-state drive and faster processer to further reduce load times. In the meantime, the company is reflective, while still looking ahead.

RYAN: I think [we have] a real sense of pride about what the PlayStation team achieved, because it's easy to forget that we sort of came out of the PS3 cycle, a little lacking in self-confidence. To do what we've done, I feel really proud of it. Sure, over the course of five or six years we've made mistakes, everybody does, but by and large I feel really proud of the way the PlayStation team delivered and executed and very happy and humbled to have played my part in that success. I think everybody who is part of it should feel similarly good to have that as part of their career.

YAMAUCHI: I've now spent over half my life with PlayStation. It was 1993 when I first made the concept design and started working on Gran Turismo. … In regard to work, you never really have time to enjoy your own achievements or successes, and no time to feel fulfilled and to take a break, but I want PlayStation to look only towards the future without looking back on its achievements, to take risks and move forward. I'm convinced that there is still much more we can do to have a good effect on society.

HERMEN HULST [Head of Worldwide Studios]: Games have now fully entered the mainstream of pop-culture media. That is both amazing and exciting. Our challenge as creators is to be meaningful to so many people while simultaneously cherishing the counter-cultural aspects that make gaming the quirky, odd, off-kilter, surprising, and sometimes shocking expressions that they need to be. Our collective voices as game devs have become more diverse and therefore more interesting as a result. It's exciting to look at a future where people around the world start seeing games as something significant, something sincere and worthwhile.

HERMEN HULST

KUTARAGI: PlayStation eventually went on to become one of Sony's mainstay businesses, a triumph which elicited another happy quote from Mr. Ohga one day while he was gazing skyward from the conference room window. "Wonderful, Kutaragi. Simply wonderful," he said. I'll never forget it.

AIM
MISSING

» PLATFORM
PS4 • Xbox One
Stadia • PC

» STYLE
1-Player Action
(4-Player Online)

» PUBLISHER
Square Enix

» DEVELOPER
Crystal Dynamics

» RELEASE
May 15

ASSEMBLING FROM SCRATCH

Crystal Dynamics shapes its own vision for the renowned superheroes in Marvel's Avengers

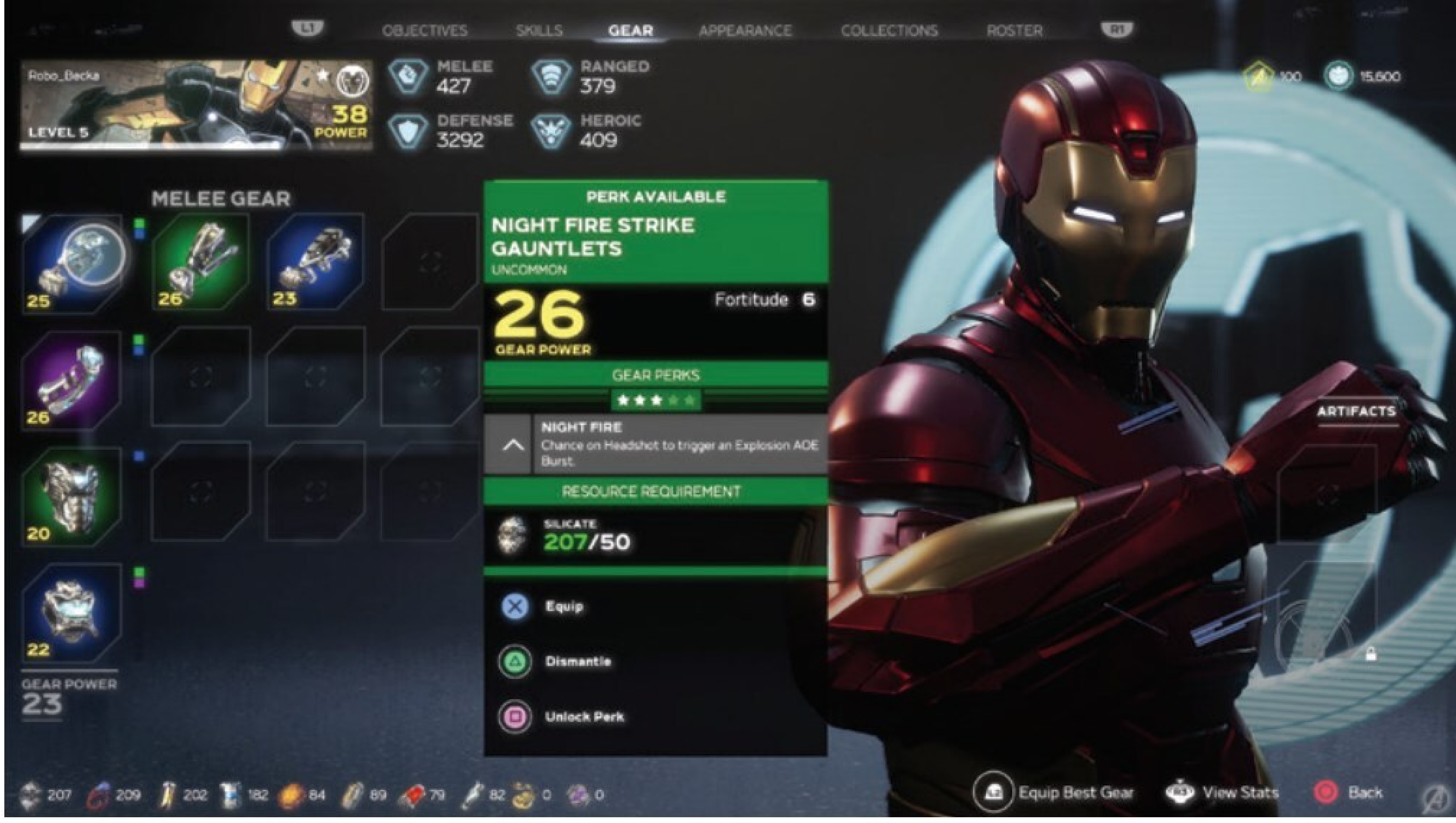
BY **MATT MILLER**

Among other events, the campaign tells the story of Kamala Khan's transformation into Ms. Marvel

How do you follow the biggest film in history? After the worldwide juggernaut that was *Avengers: Endgame*, it's not just the subsequent Marvel movies that must deal with a sense of lofty expectations; every medium that tackles these now-famous characters have some Hulk-sized shoes to fill. As Crystal Dynamics revealed its take on Marvel's Avengers at E3 2019, it faced that weight of expectation. But even accounting for that, the first appearance of the video game also gave fans mixed feelings about character appearances and the structure of gameplay. It also left everyone at a bit of a loss to understand what exactly this new game might be.

In the months since, the puzzle pieces have slowly been falling into place, even as the celebrated game studio continues to evolve and iterate on its in-progress game. A fundamental component of that effort is doing a better job of explaining the game to a very dedicated fanbase. "The biggest thing we've done since June is be better at communicating clearly to fans," says Crystal Dynamics head of studio Scot Amos.

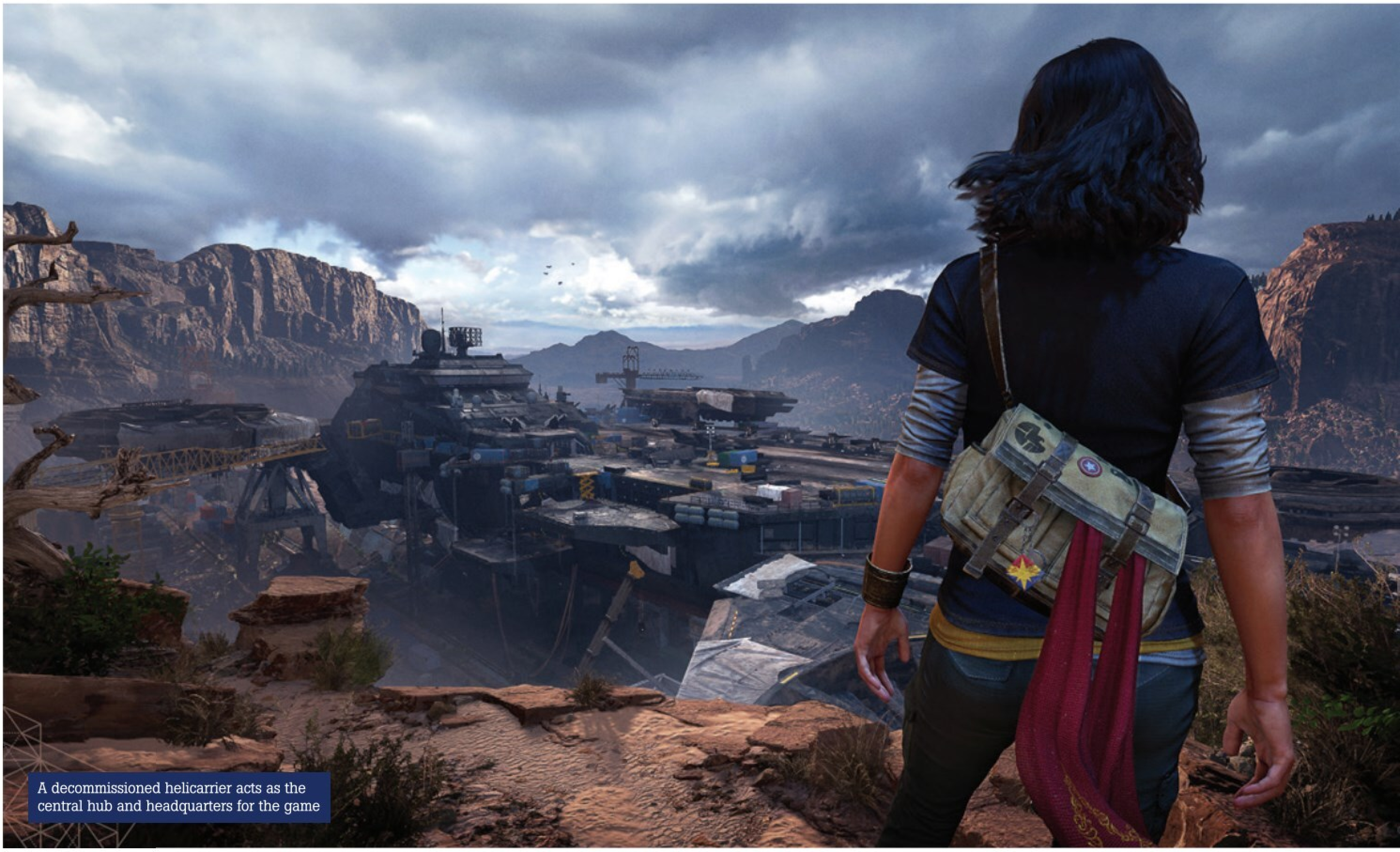
He likens the introduction of Marvel's Avengers as a game to a similar challenge the studio faced when it rebooted Tomb Raider back in 2013. Like that dramatic reinvention of a well-known brand, he feels like it took the intervening six months just to begin making the case for a new vision for such a popular license. "This is not the game of the movie," Amos says. "This is not the game of the show, or the comic. This is about the Crystal lens put on 80 years of Marvel Avengers history, and here's what we're going to do with an original story."


L1
OBJECTIVES
SKILLS
GEAR
APPEARANCE
COLLECTIONS
ROSTER
R1
Robo_Becka
LEVEL 5
38
POWER
MELEE
427
RANGED
379
DEFENSE
3292
HEROIC
409
100
15,600
MELEE GEAR
25
26
23
26
20
22
GEAR POWER
23
PERK AVAILABLE
NIGHT FIRE STRIKE GAUNTLETS
UNCOMMON
26
GEAR POWER
Fortitude 6
GEAR PERKS
★★★★★
NIGHT FIRE
Chance on Headshot to trigger an Explosion AOE Burst.
RESOURCE REQUIREMENT
SILICATE
207/50
Equip
Dismantle
Unlock Perk
ARTIFACTS
207
209
202
182
84
89
79
82
0
0
Equip Best Gear
View Stats
Back

But even with that reassurance, fans could be forgiven for skepticism. There's a reason that so many superhero video games have faltered over the years; implementing big powers and cinematic presentation is a challenge, even when it's just one character. And Avengers is launching with half-a-dozen heroes, with the promise of more new characters (and their related playstyles) in the months that follow. It's a monumental task, but one for which Crystal Dynamics evinces confidence. "We want to give you agency; these are characters that you get to fall in love with for the first time, or all over again if you're already a fan," Amos says. "That's something that we hadn't done a great job of communicating upfront, and that's what we've been spending these months breadcrumbing back to. It's been fun showing fans that there's been progress on our characters, including visuals and aesthetics. We're constantly iterating to improve our heroes. What new things can we do from aesthetics to mechanics to moves, and starting to explain that to people? It's been difficult for us to encapsulate how large an experience this is – how much stuff there is to do with these heroes."

That big concept begins with storytelling and finding an entry point for players to get on board with this new vision of the Avengers. To do that, Crystal Dynamics picked a character within the fiction that could easily bridge the normal human perspective to superheroic heights. "Kamala Khan is that point-of-view character for our story," Amos says. Introduced in the comics back in 2013, Kamala is an up-and-coming lead within the fiction – an Avengers fangirl who suddenly gets thrust into the life of a hero herself. The campaign tells the story of the Avengers' fall from grace and subsequent redemption, but also Kamala's transformation into Ms. Marvel. "The Terrigen mists corrupt San Francisco, and affects all of those characters there, including Kamala Khan, giving her those inhuman powers." We pick up her tale five years later, when the campaign really starts, as she finds evidence that the Avengers were set up, and Kamala is the guiding force that pulls the team back together.

Structurally, the campaign is both a standalone story, but also an introduction to a broader living game. "There is a beginning, middle, and end to the campaign as a story, as a function of setting up the overall world state," Amos says. As single-player hero missions gradually introduce new heroes and locations, new warzone missions also open up, which support anything from solo to up to four-player cooperative play. "Anybody in your roster that you've reassembled can play any of those Warzone missions at any time," Amos explains. "That starts giving you more world narrative and context beyond just Kamala reassembling the Avengers. Now that I have them, what else is going on in the world, what other wrongs have to be righted?"



A decommissioned helicarrier acts as the central hub and headquarters for the game

Every team needs a base of operations, and that's especially true for the Avengers; within the comics, there's always a mansion, tower, or other site that serves as home. In the game, that place is a decommissioned helicarrier, which Amos describes as a place to upgrade, practice, and from which to launch missions. It's here that players can observe the war-table, a holographic display that shows trouble hotspots around the globe. If playing through the campaign, the next mission is helpfully marked with an Avengers icon. Other icons mark available warzones, sometimes with specific rewards to chase. Players can change the difficulty of missions to match their current gear power, or just to tackle an especially big challenge – and garner commensurate rewards.

While the details remain scarce, the helicarrier also upgrades over the course of the game. "As I start rebuilding my Avengers as a force to be reckoned with, what might happen with the helicarrier to help us be able to get around the globe faster? What might happen to be able to move us from where we are right now to other parts of the world?" Amos says. While he seemed hesitant to confirm in absolute terms, it seems clear that the helicarrier won't remain completely decommissioned for long.

Like other ongoing living games, Avengers must confront the problem of crafting meaningful content that engages players long after they've seen missions and locations for the first time. And similar to The Division or Destiny, a big part of answering that need in Avengers comes from character customization. "Going through the campaign, while you might reassemble the Avengers, that doesn't mean you've maxed them all out," Amos says. Each of the playable heroes earns experience for the completion of objectives and missions, which in turn leads to investable skill points, used to fill out a tree of varied abilities, often along multiple distinct areas of focus.

"In Iron Man's case, the repulsors, the lasers, and the rockets are the three types of skill weaponry you can unlock," Amos says. If unlocked, you can seamlessly switch between them with a tap of the d-pad. Fly toward a squad of AIM robots and blast them at range with repulsors, sweep in close to slash them with a laser-scythe, and then paint multiple distant targets for a barrage of locked rockets; that variety is an option, presuming you've unlocked the necessary skills. Playing with the Asgardian god instead? Perhaps you double-down on thunder abilities, which allow you to float above the action and excel at crowd control. Or alternately put all your skills into melee, turning Thor into a powerhouse who stuns and pins enemies while in the heart of the fray.

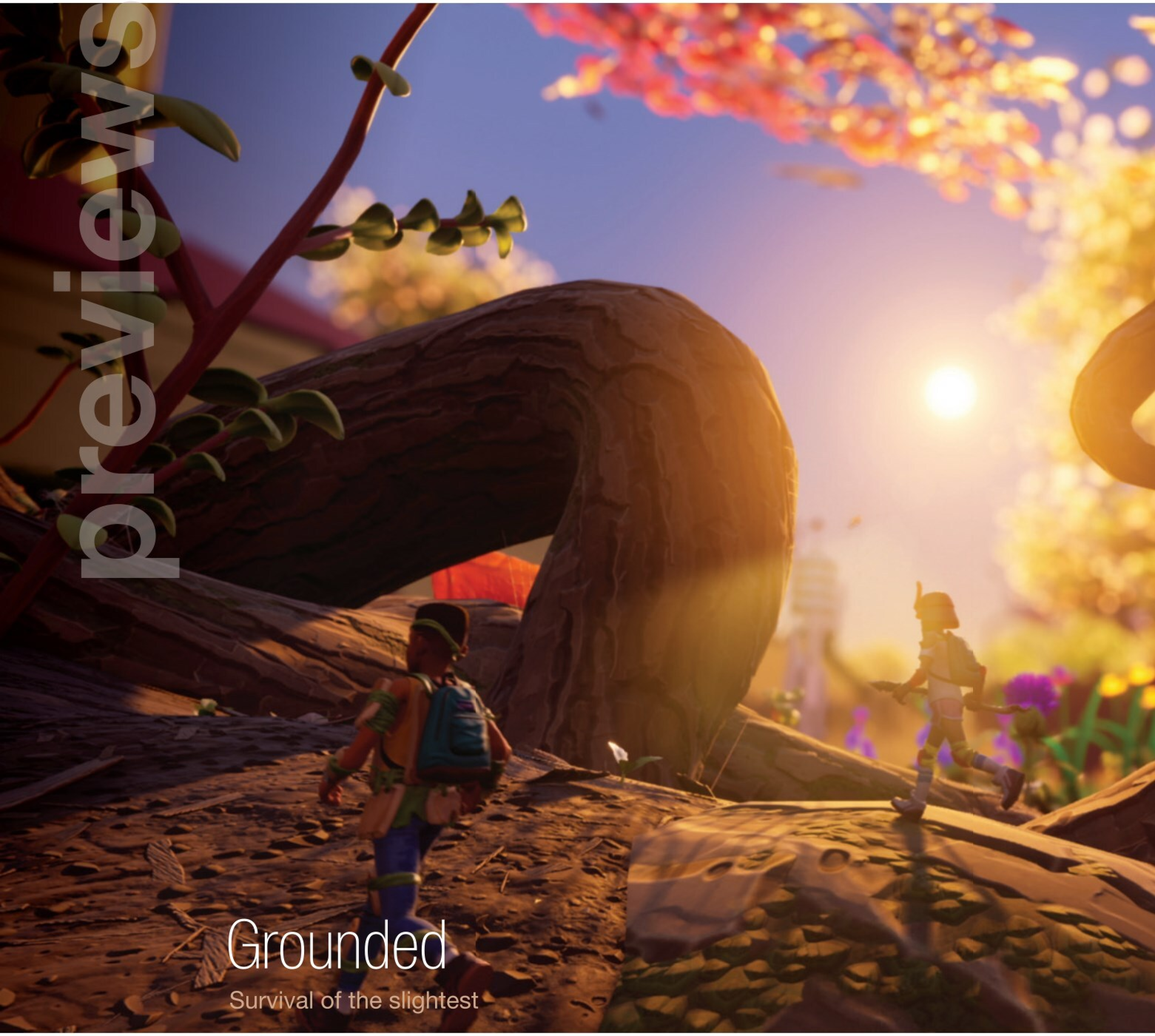
Beyond skill trees, the second area of customization is through equipment. "We have gear that goes from common and rare, to epic and legendary, and even beyond that," Amos says. Each hero's gear climb is independent. Iron Man might collect reactors while Black Widow chases weapons unique to her acrobatic martial arts. No matter its nature, each piece of gear carries perks, which act as buffs to certain combos and other moves, hopefully allowing for a healthy breadth of playstyle variety.

The third sphere of customization is cosmetics. "Outfits are separate from skills and gear," Amos assures us. "You can look the way you want to look. And you can play the way you want to play." Some cosmetics show up as deterministic rewards from in-game activities, or even from completing a specific chain of missions together. Other appearance options appear on the game's real-money marketplace. The goal is to tap the long history of these characters to let players enact their preferred heroic style while wading into battle.

All those disparate elements mean that there's a lot for the user interface and menus to display. The current approach is still a work-in-progress, but borrows liberally from the floating selection cursor and contextual pop-ups of the Destiny franchise. "We are gamers at heart, so any time we have a chance to look at competitor products, we love learning whatever we can," Amos says. For the team at Crystal Dynamics, the biggest challenge is the ever-growing library of information that needs to be communicated to players. The current approach aims to encapsulate as much of that information as possible into clear and uncluttered detail.

After months during which I felt like I didn't know what to expect from Marvel's Avengers, my conversation with Amos went a long way to clarify the type of game to expect. But there's no doubt that many questions remain unanswered. How will leveling and progression be handled for characters you're not actively playing? What happens when players of differing gear power levels want to play together? What other mission types exist, if any, beyond hero missions and warzones? It was clear that Amos and his team are on the verge of pulling the curtain back on these and other fundamental questions, but we'll have to wait until we're a bit closer to the spring release to get the answers.

In the meantime, even as it remains to be seen how all the pieces will fit together, I'm reassured that one of my favorite fictional properties is being handled with attention and care. And moreover, that Crystal Dynamics is aiming high, attempting to build a game that players could lose themselves in for more than just a week of blasting through a brief campaign. "We're in this for the long haul," Amos told me. "We're building a world that you can escape into. We're making this combination of great stories – epic stories of the human spirit – and how we get this to be your Avengers, your way." ◆



Grounded

Survival of the slightest

» Platform
Xbox One • PC

» Style
1-Player Action
(1 to 4-Player Online)

» Publisher
Microsoft Game Studios

» Developer
Obsidian Entertainment

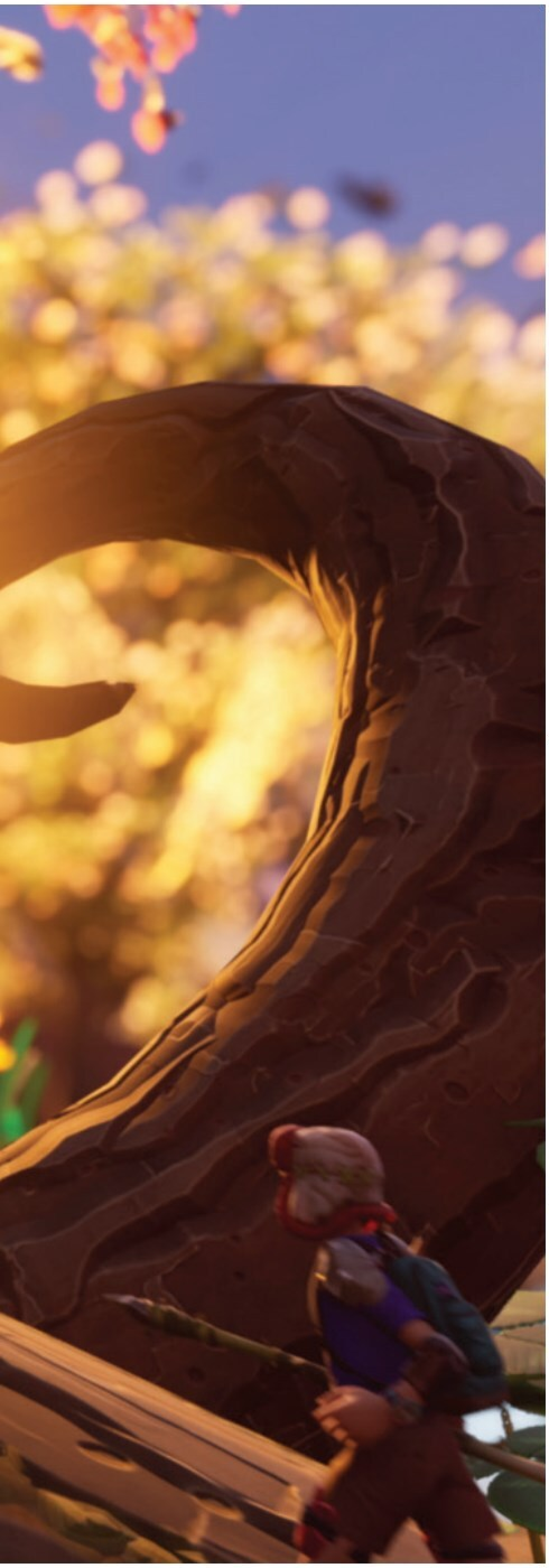
» Release
Spring

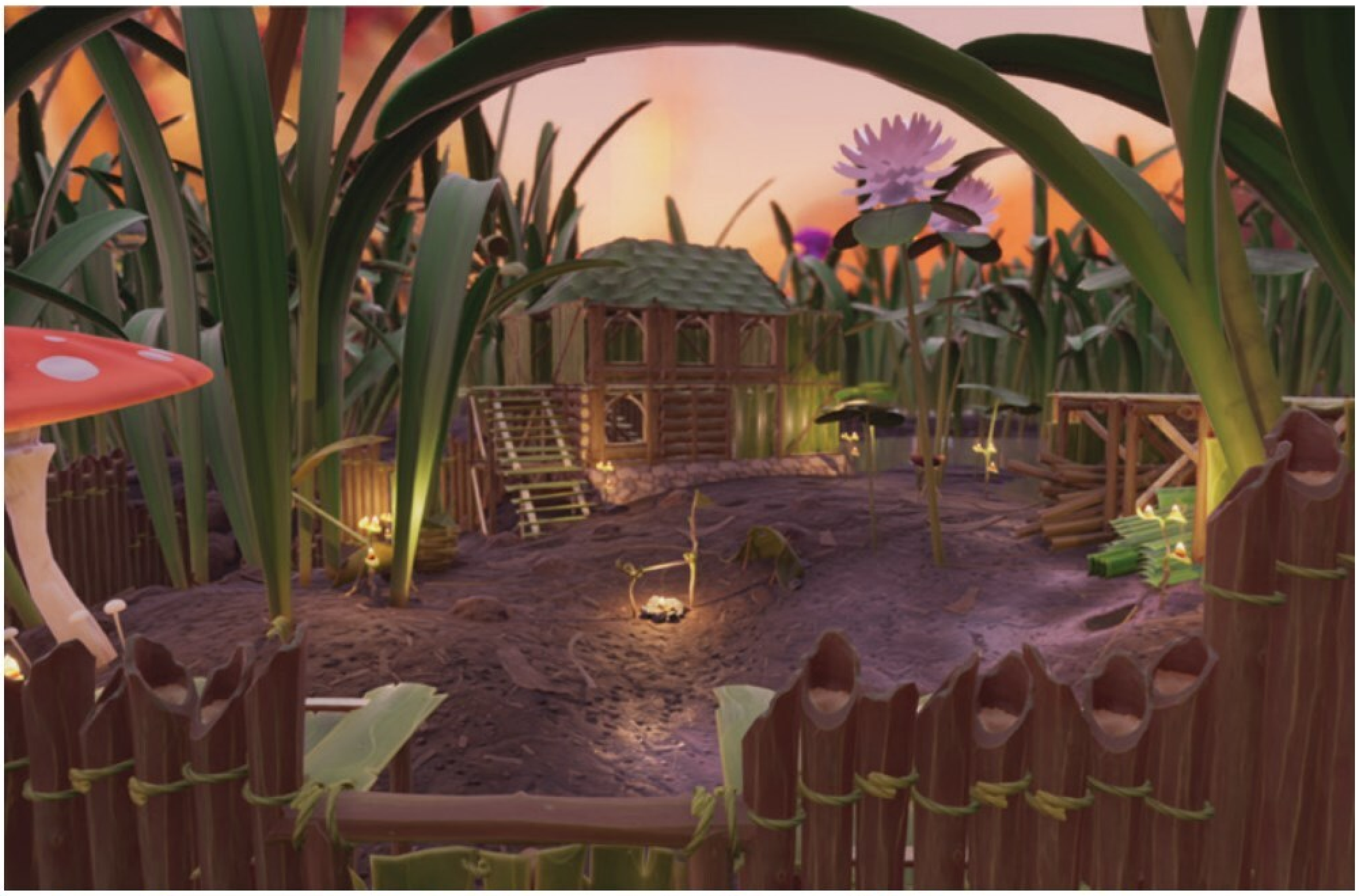
The trouble starts after the sun sets. The leaves around you begin to rustle, and moments later a giant beast lunges forward, its fangs dripping venom, its legs bent at odd angles. You've been preparing for this moment for weeks – scavenging supplies from the environment and learning to navigate this wild climate. With confidence, you tighten the grip on your makeshift axe and brace for a hard fight. This mysterious wilderness is unforgiving but it is also oddly familiar … because it is your own backyard.

"When we started this project, we asked what fantasies survival games haven't hit on yet," says Obsidian's game director Adam Brennecke. "We sat in a room and listed out like 50 different survival-game settings, and the one that was like, 'Oh, that's actually pretty cool!' was the idea of being small in a backyard. Our minds raced with ideas, coming up with cool things that you could find and do in that kind of world."

The world Obsidian created is now called Grounded. The studio is keeping Grounded's story details under wraps for the moment, but the basic premise is that you are a young kid who agrees to participate in a crazy science experiment where you are shrunk to the size of a bug and then asked to collect biological samples for testing. Naturally, the experiment goes haywire, and you are stuck in your diminutive form and forced to fight for your own survival among Earth's insects. Since Grounded takes place in a lifelike environment, Obsidian sees this as an opportunity for players to learn about nature while they play.

"We want to take the really weird stuff – the stuff I never expected to learn working on this game – and sprinkle that into the game," Brennecke says. "For example, ants and aphids have an interesting relationship. You can watch videos of this, but ants actually collect aphids. They don't kill them. They bring them back to their ant colony and have little rooms in their anthill for aphids. It's almost like they're





pets, but ants like to eat the honeydew that aphids secrete. It's so weird, but most ant-hill colonies have these little aphid farms. So you might learn something new playing the game."

Like most survival games, players start off with a meager supply of items and use their wits and ingenuity to slowly work their way up a tech tree. For example, you might begin the game gathering pebbles and sprouts to make an axe. Players can then use that axe to hunt for food (grubs) or to chop down giant blades of grass that can be used to build small shelters. Naturally, as your technology advances, you'll be able to craft more advanced weapons, armors, and tools. Backyard survivors can even invite up to three friends into their game and work together to outfit their camps or take down more dangerous creatures, such as spiders.

"We have hundreds of insects in the world doing their own thing," Brennecke says. "They all work off distinct behaviors, which we tried to model as close to nature as possible. Our ant hills behave like real ant-hills. They'll send scouts to look for food, and they communicate through a pheromone system. Each ant-hill is its own faction, so there's different ways of playing them off each other. And all this is running in parallel with what the player is doing, so if the player is hunting in a particular environment for a long time, there's gonna be a lack of food, and that will definitely change the ecosystem."

Grounded is unlike anything Obsidian has worked on before. The studio is best known for RPGs like the Pillars of Eternity series and the recent hit The Outer Worlds, so Grounded is a bit of an experiment. However, this *Honey, I Shrunk the Kids*-style survival game seems promising. Appropriately, Obsidian has kept its team size small for this project, to around 13 people, which has allowed the studio to take bigger chances. We'll find out if those risks pay off when the game releases in early access in the Spring.

» **Ben Reeves**

Microsoft Flight Simulator

Soaring to new heights

» **Platform**
Xbox One • PC

» **Style**
1-Player Simulation

» **Publisher**
Xbox Game Studios

» **Developer**
Asobo Studio

» **Release**
2020

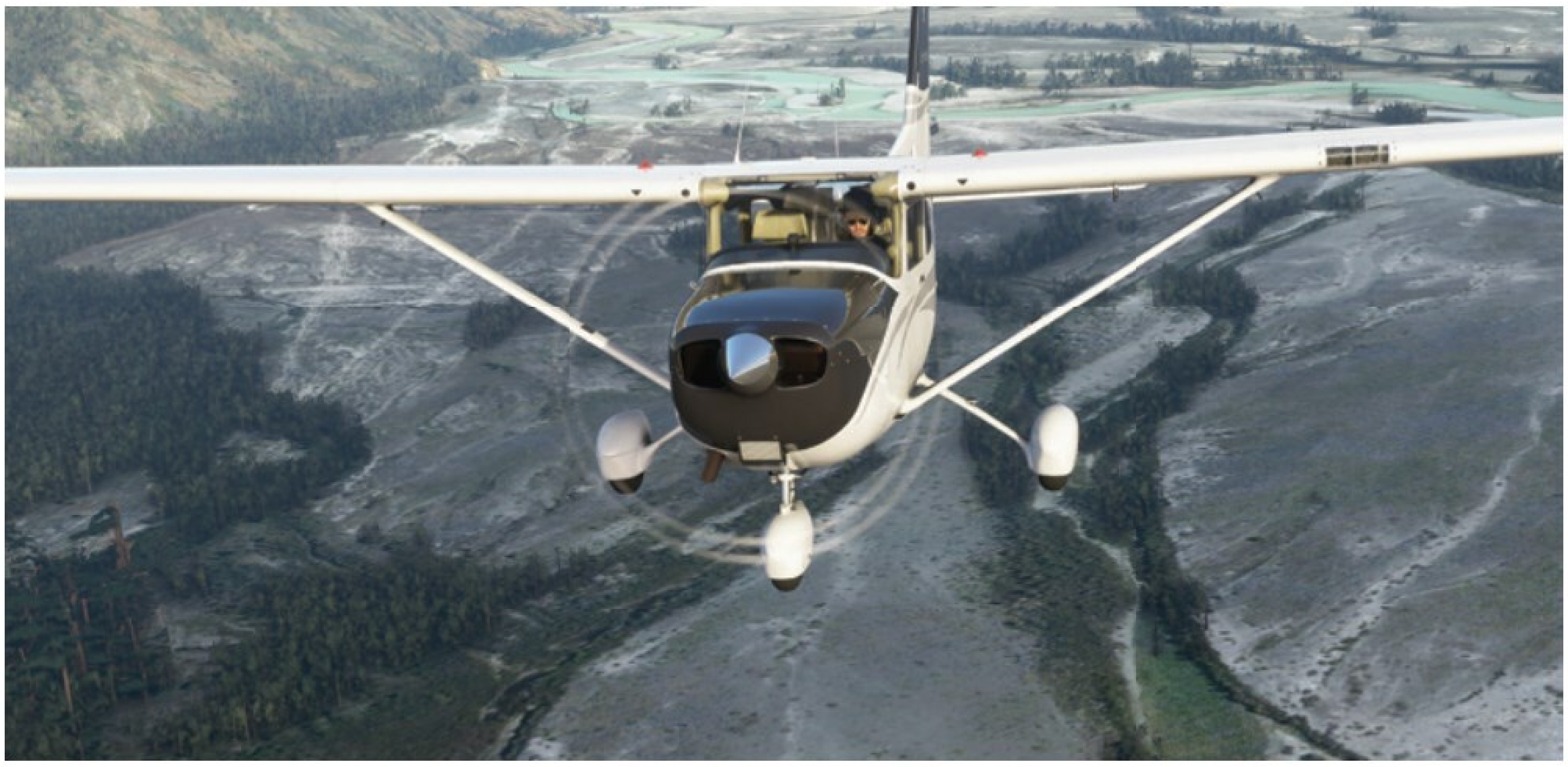
For decades, the Microsoft Flight Simulator series has given aviation enthusiasts a way to get their virtual wings. However, with more than 13 years since the most recent entry, would-be pilots haven't had the mainstay series to rely on. Thankfully, Microsoft Flight Simulator is back with a host of innovative features to give virtual pilots the most ambitious flight-simulation software ever created.

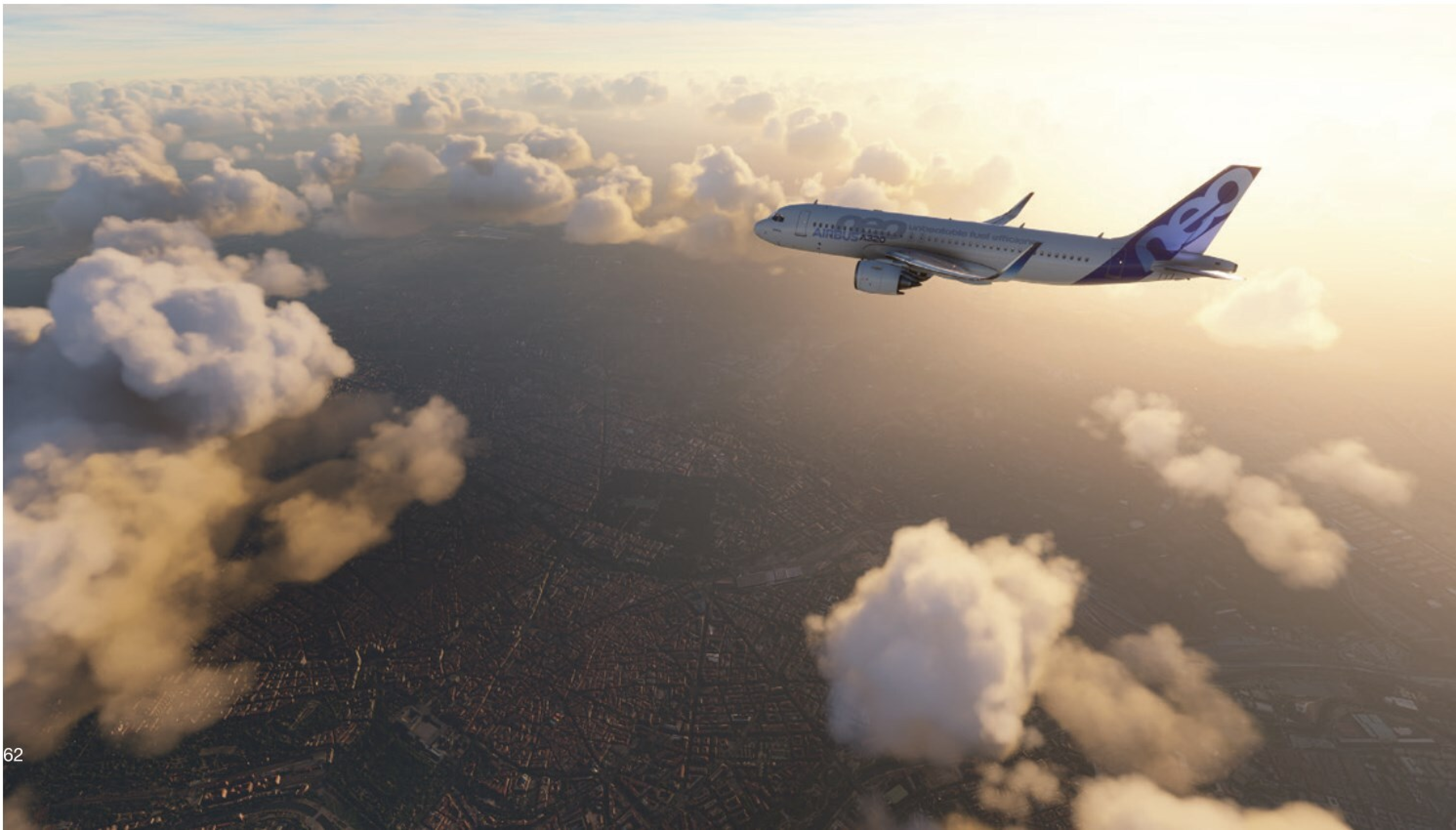
As I sit into the cockpit of my virtual plane (a gaming chair in front of a desk with an advanced yoke system, complete with a throttle panel to my right and rudder panels at my feet), I'm loaded into a mid-flight instance over the gorgeous city of Naples, Italy. Suddenly appearing in the cockpit, I feel a brief sense of nervousness as I grip the control wheel. Looking around the iconic city, I'm stunned by how gorgeous everything looks. The distinct architecture of the seaside Italian city passes beneath my aircraft with photorealistic visuals. Though I'm responsible for keeping the small plane airborne, I can't take my eyes off the city beneath me.

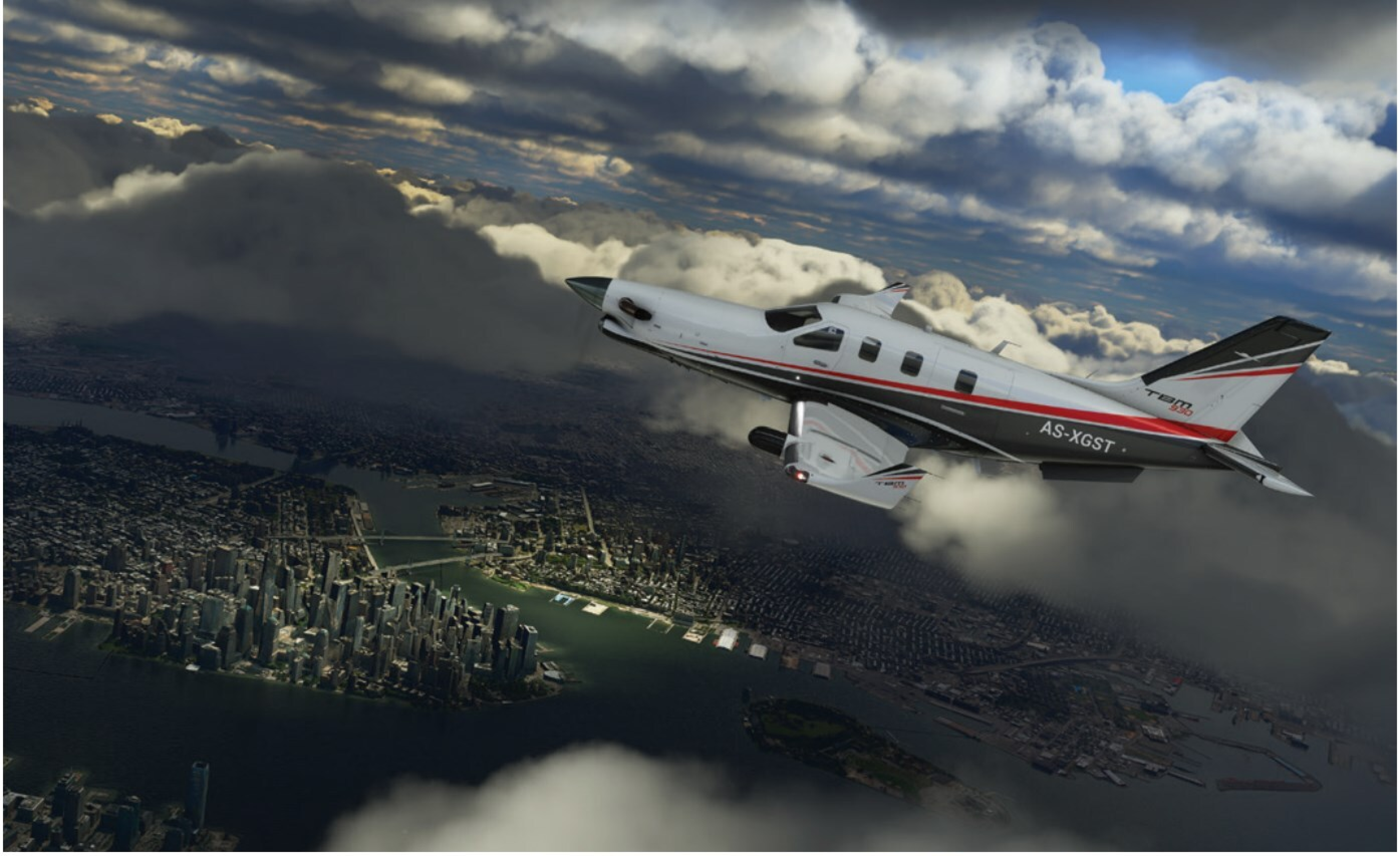
No matter where you choose to fly – and you can choose anywhere on the planet – the cities, landscapes, and natural landmarks are presented in photorealism. This is thanks to advanced photogrammetry that leverages data and textures from Microsoft's Bing to create 3D models of every building, tree, and mountain on Earth. The team has to go in and make sure everything looks good (some trees and unique buildings like Seattle's Space Needle don't capture from satellite well), but the advanced machine learning used in this process greatly lowers the number of human hours put into creating this ultra-realistic planet. Then, it streams to your machine using Microsoft's Azure cloud technology. Because of this, you can circumnavigate a photorealistic globe in a single session – if you have enough fuel.

The team isn't stopping there, however, as other real-time data helps deliver an even more authentic experience. As I continue flying over Naples, we change the weather mode in the environment. The initial load featured calm weather and clear skies. However, by adjusting one option, I'm suddenly experiencing the weather in Naples in real time; I guess it was a pretty windy morning in southern Italy. From there, I toggle to different cloud settings, various times of day, and even a low-visibility rainstorm where I must rely on my instruments. The team is also looking into real-time tracking of animal migrations, natural disasters, and even car traffic on the ground.

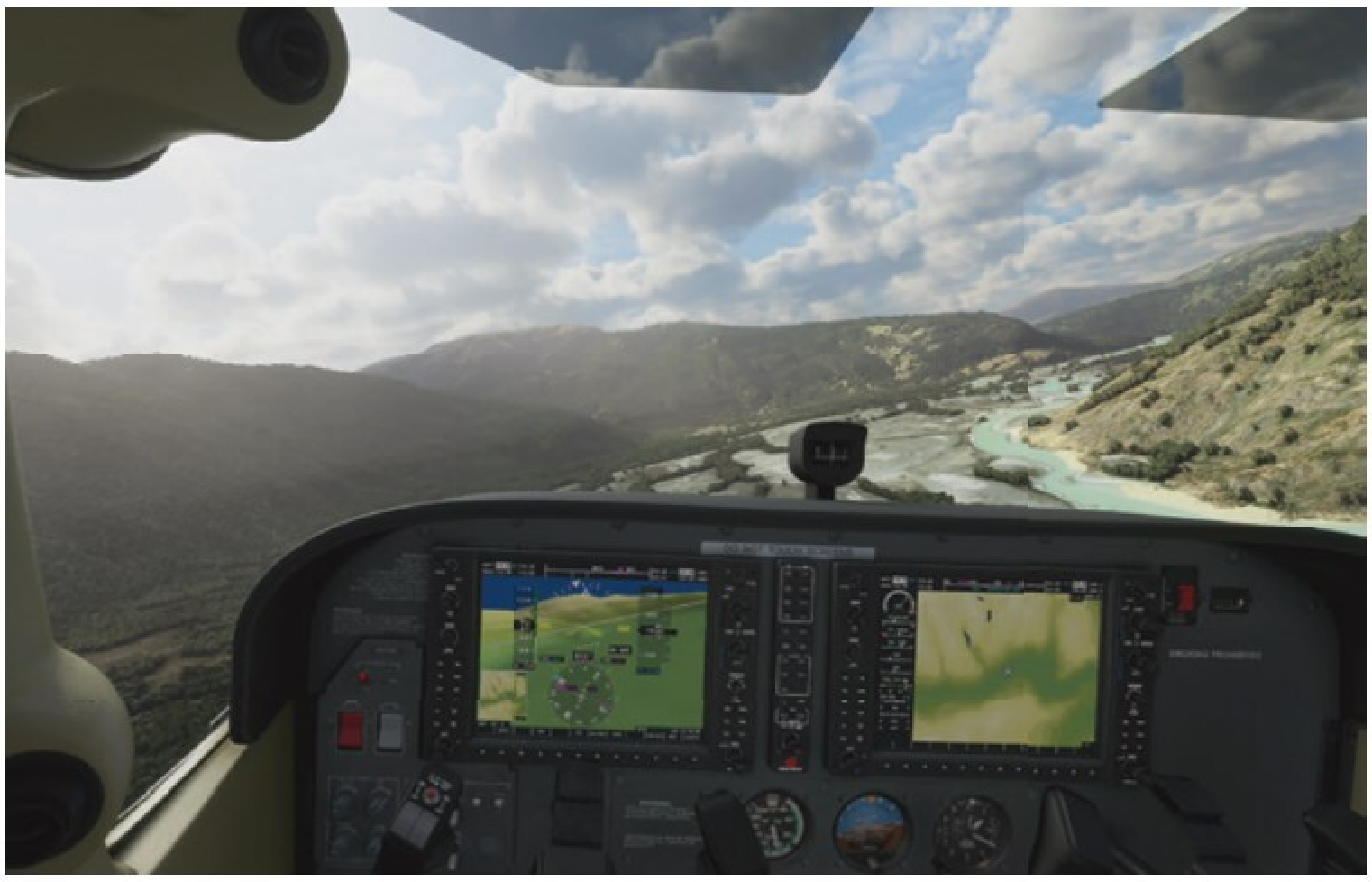
In addition, Microsoft Flight Simulator has the power to track real-world flight traffic using transponder







signals. “We know where every airplane is, and we actually render it in real time,” says Microsoft’s Jorg Neumann, head of Microsoft Flight Simulator. “We [also] have A.I.-driven planes, and then everything from the air-traffic controller gets a slot. The interaction between us and the real world’s traffic is kind of complicated. You have options: You can either fly with just A.I. traffic and we control everything, or you fly with just real-world traffic. And then, the really hard one is the blend. We’re still working on that! It’s hard!”



After enjoying the scenery of Naples for a while, I decide to try and land at Naples International Airport. After several botched approaches, I finally give myself a wide enough radius and begin descending toward the runway. As I get closer, I rely more on lowering my throttle and using the aircraft’s flaps to create drag than actually pointing the control wheel toward the ground. Keeping things steady as I get closer to the ground is difficult, as the slightest motion could cause me to roll too far to one side. After some gentle corrections on the way to the ground, I finally land. It’s a rough landing for sure, but I’m safe. Now that I’m on the ground, I press both feet into the rudders beneath the desk to bring the plane to a stop.

My next session takes me to the United States at Renton Municipal Airport near Microsoft’s offices just outside of Seattle. In this session, I’m already on the ground, but that’s not where I want to be. I pull up to the start of the runway and put the plane into full throttle. As I reach takeoff speed, I slowly pull back on the yoke and ascend to cruising altitude. Using my instruments, I easily reach the skies over Seattle. However, my most difficult challenge awaits.

The final session takes me to Courchevel Altiport, one of the world’s most dangerous airports. Located in the French Alps, getting a perfect approach is important since you have little room for do-overs. In addition, the airport has a sloped runway, meaning you have to land at an incline rather than a flat surface. This means that you must pull the nose up at the last moment to land smoothly. While I lower the throttle too much on my first approach and crash into the nearby trees, for my second attempt I coast in towards a safe landing, only to veer slightly off course when I pull the nose up and land a bit rough. However, it was such a challenging scenario, I’ll take the rough landing.

While I walked away from my time with Microsoft Flight Simulator impressed, you’ll need to make a serious investment into your hardware in order to enjoy it the way I did; the yoke system bundle I played on currently retails just over $300. It’s all but certain that playing on a keyboard or controller would feel substantially less immersive, but those who are there for the thrill of exploring the planet from the point-of-view of birds can still do so without the fancy peripherals.

With so much amazing technology at work, Microsoft Flight Simulator is infinitely ambitious, and if what I experienced with my hands-on time is any indication, aspiring pilots and newcomers should be excited to take to this sky in the series’ upcoming return.
» **Brian Shea**

Battletoads

Zitz and all

» **Platform**
Xbox One • PC

» **Style**
1 to 3-Player Action

» **Publisher**
Xbox Game Studios

» **Developer**
Dlala Studios

» **Release**
TBA

The Battletoads series was initially created to rival the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles arcade-style beat 'em-up games of the late '80s and early '90s. While the four brotherly turtles have evolved and remained in the mainstream consciousness through various TV shows, movies, and video games of varying quality, the Battletoads have all but vanished. However, after years of teases from Xbox, the Battletoads finally reemerged at E3 2019.

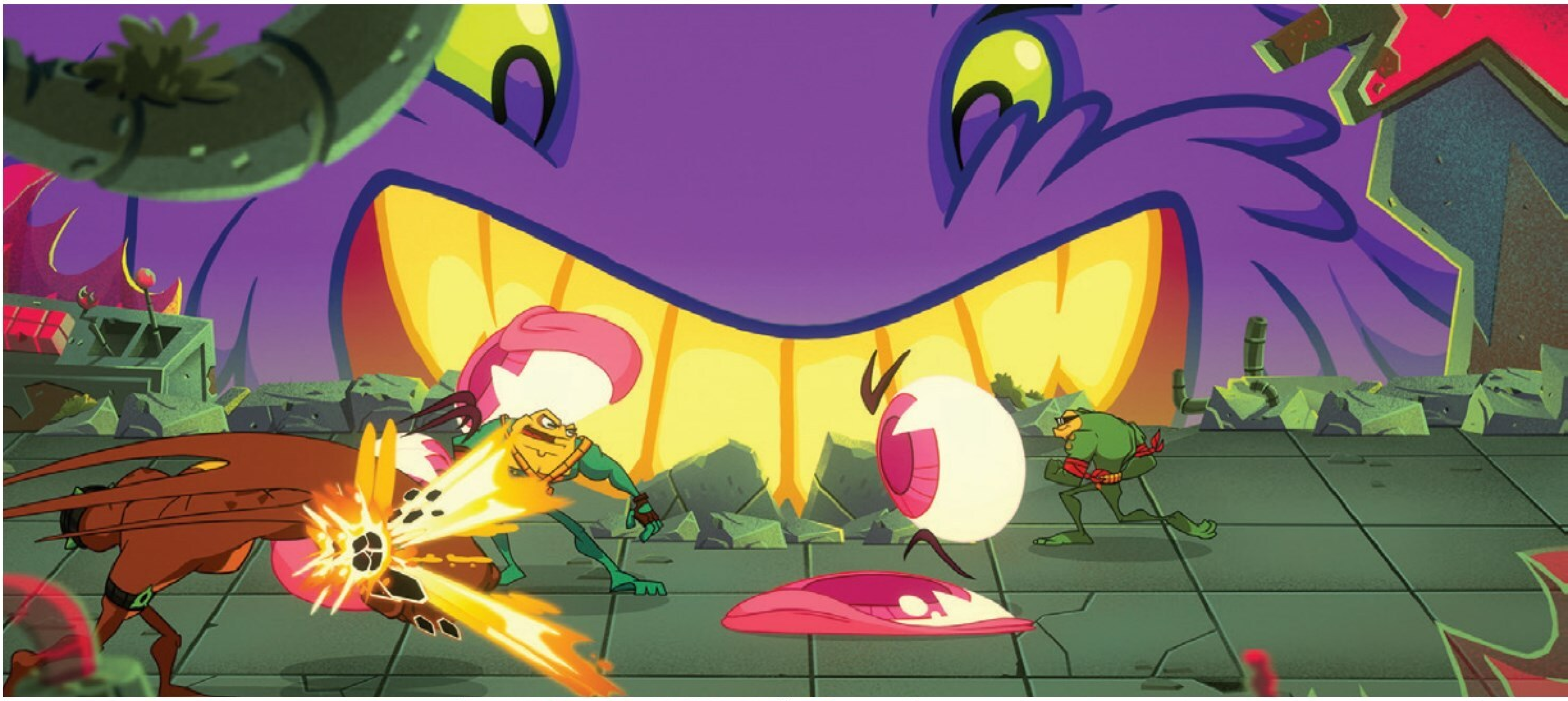
For better and for worse, Battletoads plays a lot like the games that began the franchise. The three toads, Rash, Zitz, and Pimple, can and will jump right into any confrontation without a second's thought. Volleying enemies between the three brothers is the highlight of my experience with Battletoads, as the enemies bounce around the screen like delightful pinballs. You can attack in a few different ways, but I love holding down a button and unleashing a charged morphing attack – Rash's foot grows enormous as he kicks, while Pimple's hulking physique morphs to resemble a train as he plows through the enemies before him.

However, as I play through the various encounters, it becomes evident that the side-scrolling beat 'em-up genre has yet to make the transition to the modern age. Sure, the graphics look better and the controls are a bit smoother, but the encounters all feature a tinge of "been there, done that," which makes sense since you're battling waves upon waves of the same three or four enemies with a limited moveset for the entire level. The encounters all blur together, with little to set them apart from one another aside from an occasional new enemy type.

Thankfully, a boss battle breaks up the stage's slightly monotonous action. Porkshank is such a tank of an enemy that he's invulnerable to attack until you let him wear himself out with his own flurry of punches. However, I learn the hard way that his size isn't just for show when I dodge a bit too late and he takes out a considerable amount of my health with one combination. If this giant pig isn't enough of a problem, he has the constant support of minion characters as well. However, with a little persistence and a lot of timing, we finally take down Porkshank and move on to a hoverbike stage.

Players of the original Battletoads games likely have the hoverbike etched into their memories due to the fast-paced and punishing nature. While hoverbike stages are no longer side-scrolling like they were in the 8-bit era, they aren't exactly a walk in the park. The camera now swings behind your bikes, giving you an oncoming view of the obstacles and pitfalls. With plenty of experience with racing games, I figured this would be a breeze. However, thanks to a back-breaking sense of speed and an enormous collection of offset barriers, jumps, and pits, my poor toad's bike erupts into flames more times than I'd like to admit.

Fans have been clamoring for the Battletoad brothers to return following their lengthy hiatus. While I walked away from my hands-on time not completely sold on this revitalization, I'm glad to have these icons back in action. » **Brian Shea**



CrossfireX

Making a push for global domination

» Platform
Xbox One

» Style
1-Player Shooter
(Online TBA)

» Publisher
Xbox Game Studios

» Developer
Smilegate,
Remedy Entertainment

» Release
2020

CrossFire first took Korea by storm in 2007, becoming one of the most-played and top-grossing video games ever. The game hit the U.S. years later, but it never found the same traction as it did in Eastern markets. Now, CrossfireX is set to kick off the series' newfound push for global popularity with a new engine, fan-favorite maps, and an all-new campaign from Control and Alan Wake developer Remedy Entertainment.

CrossfireX brings much of the original CrossFire's core content, such as the maps and modes, so those who haven't played the series can get a look at what made it so popular in the first place. Players join one of two private military factions to complete objective-based missions. While competitive multiplayer is the core of the franchise, CrossfireX adds a new single-player campaign, as well as a battle-royale mode.

With the original game being more than a decade old, the core gameplay needed some modernizations. Developer Smilegate rebuilt the entire game in Unreal Engine 4, added the ability to aim down the sights, and made great strides in improving the visuals.

The gameplay reveal trailer focuses on one of the original CrossFire's most popular maps: Black Widow. While the map is carried forward, it's more than just a remastered version of it. "It's a very popular fan-favorite map in China," Smilegate technical art director Jin Woo Jung says. "Our team has put a lot of love to rebuild the things which weren't possible in our very old engine. Using the Unreal Engine gives us more opportunities to meet the expectations of the players and what they want to see visually."

Hot off Control, one of 2019's biggest games, Remedy Entertainment is working on an all-new single-player campaign for CrossfireX. According to Tuukka Taipalvesi, executive producer at Remedy, the team at Smilegate were big fans. "They came to us because of our strengths of building worlds, building characters which are not one dimensional and that actually have a lot of depth," he says. "That's what we do. We tell stories through characters in worlds that either we build or someone else has built."

Because CrossFire was primarily successful in Asia, Taipalvesi admits he didn't know much about the game prior to starting work on the single-player campaign. "I've been in esports before it was even 'esports' and played a lot of high-end FPS, but I had only a rudimentary knowledge of what CrossFire is when Smilegate contacted us," he says. "It's just like, 'Let's Google this up and see what's what,' and then get a client, get some streams, and start to immerse myself into it."

Remedy can't yet talk about the single-player campaign, but developing a first-person shooter is an exciting prospect. "We have a lot of FPS fans," Remedy communications director Thomas Puha says. "It's just like this fun challenge of, 'We could get to do that and see what is a Remedy experience in a first-person shooter.'"

Despite Remedy's involvement, you shouldn't expect the mind-bending gameplay seen in games like Control or Max Payne, as it must still exist in the CrossFire universe. However, Remedy did some soul searching to determine what exactly defines a Remedy experience. Unfortunately, Remedy couldn't talk about its findings, so we'll have to wait until the team can divulge concrete details about the single-player campaign.

Thankfully, CrossfireX launches in 2020, so the wait isn't going to be too long for players to get their hands on it. With a strong pedigree, an overwhelmingly successful past, and an updated suite of features and gameplay, CrossfireX could prove to be a big hit when it comes to Xbox One next year. » **Brian Shea**

Everwild

A new adventure from Rare

» Platform
Xbox One • PC

» Style
TBA

» Publisher
Xbox Game Studios

» Developer
Rare

» Release
TBA

When Microsoft acquired Rare in 2002 for $375 million, gamers expected the studio to be one of Xbox's biggest contributors for triple-A content. This partnership began with the release of Grabbed by the Ghoulies, a game that didn't deliver much excitement and ended up setting the tone for a number of misses, from Conker: Live & Reloaded to Perfect Dark Zero. In the years that followed, the studio moved on to smaller, more experimental experiences like Viva Pinata and a slate of games for Microsoft's ill-fated Kinect. With that peripheral out of the way, the 2018 release of Sea of Thieves marked a new era for Rare, one that carried the creativity and innovation of its Nintendo 64 work. Even with full support still being pumped into Sea of Thieves, Rare is prepping another adventure for players to embark on, this time in a world of magic.

At this year's X019 event in London, Rare pulled back the curtain on a new intellectual property called Everwild. Rare says this project is still early in development, and didn't want to say much about it other than giving players "new ways to play in a natural and magical world" filled with "memorable, engaging, and meaningful experiences for players everywhere to share."

The short teaser trailer for Everwild gives us an idea of what to expect from the setting, but not much from gameplay. We see shot after shot of a world untouched. Sprawling fields, dense forests, and wildlife are everywhere – free of manmade structures and contraptions. The creatures within this beautiful place are familiar in terms of body type, but while something may look like a deer, its features are alien, such as horns that unfurl in the sunlight like a flower.

We then see a shot of three humans adventuring through a forest. Again, they look immediately familiar with colorful cloaks and attire stripped from fantasy, but their only actions are to observe, implying a little that one of the hallmarks of this experience may be studying creatures. The trio sits silently in a flower bed to observe a flock of dinosaur-like birds.

One of the characters scales a rock, much like Lara Croft scurrying up a wall, and is helped up onto a cliff by another character. Another shot shows the group standing by idly as a giant boar feeds and nurtures her children. The only moment that screams combat may be a part of this experience comes from a shot of a cave that reveals a colorful sabertooth tiger to an ominous melody.

The final sequence in the trailer shows one character telling the others to stand back as she slowly approaches a deer. The tall beast moves slowly toward her, and she extends a hand just as cautiously to its forehead. When the two beings connect, a blinding light is emitted and the trailer ends.

Even though we don't know what to expect from Everwild's gameplay, the world looks absolutely gorgeous and a big hook appears to be discovering new creatures. Everwild also looks like another cooperative journey from Rare, and the video suggests it could be for a group of three, although nothing is certain at this point. Everwild has been announced for Xbox One and PC, but given its early state, it's easy to wonder about the possibility of Xbox Scarlett as well. » **Andrew Reiner**

Tell Me Why

Exploring painful memories

» Platform
Xbox One • PC

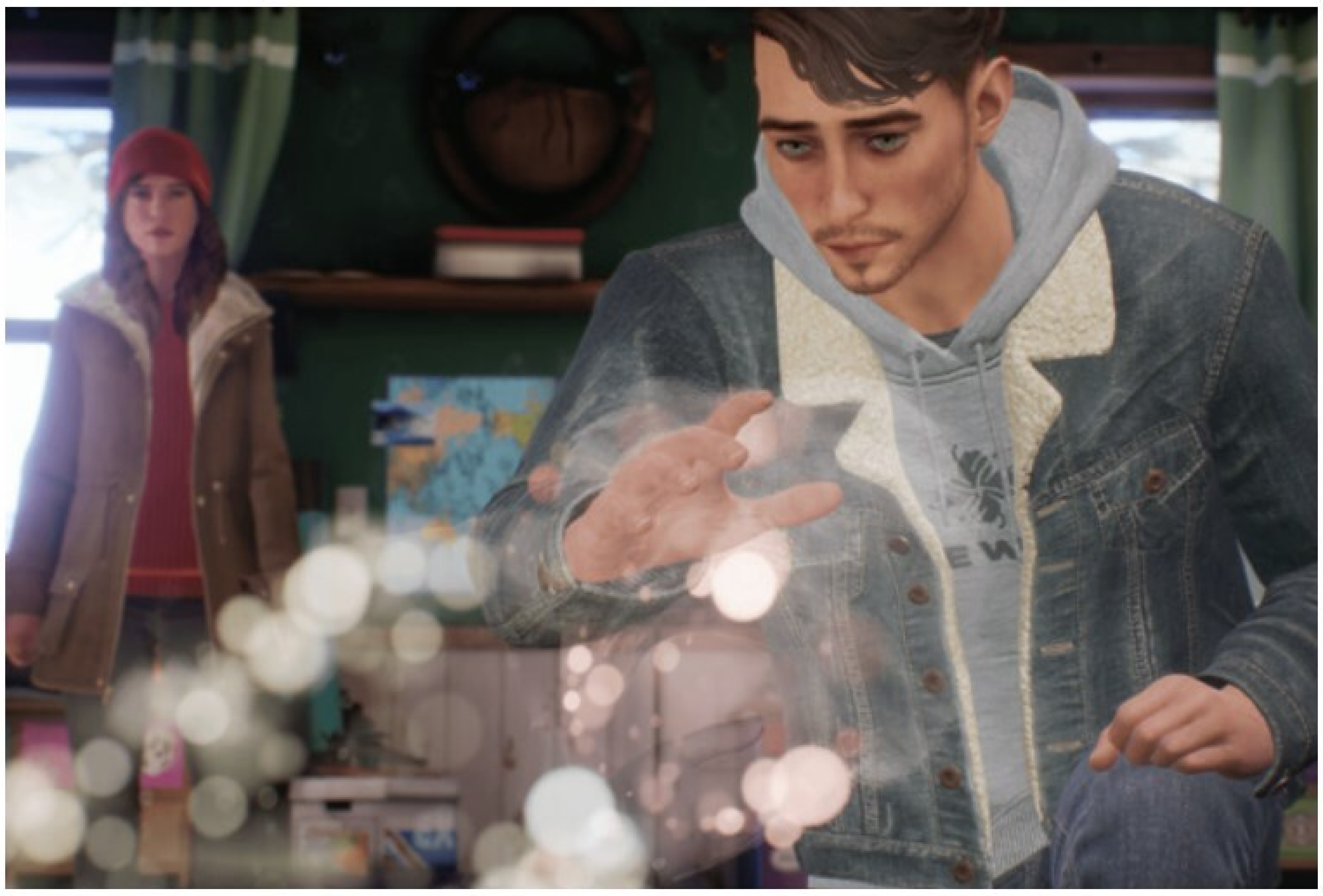
» Style
1-Player Adventure

» Publisher
Microsoft

» Developer
Dontnod

» Release
Summer

Dontnod has never been afraid to step outside its comfort zone. Its acclaimed Life is Strange series has tackled everything from depression and suicide to the current political climate and race. Other titles, such as Remember Me and Vampyr, put unique twists on established tropes, such as memory loss and adapting to a blood-sucking lifestyle. For its next project and first collaboration with Microsoft, Dontnod is continuing to confront complex issues and finding interesting ways to explore them. Announced at Microsoft's X019 event in London, Tell Me Why centers on the relationship of twins and how they view different memories from their childhood. It also marks the first playable transgender protagonist from a major studio and publisher, telling a story we don't often see in video games.



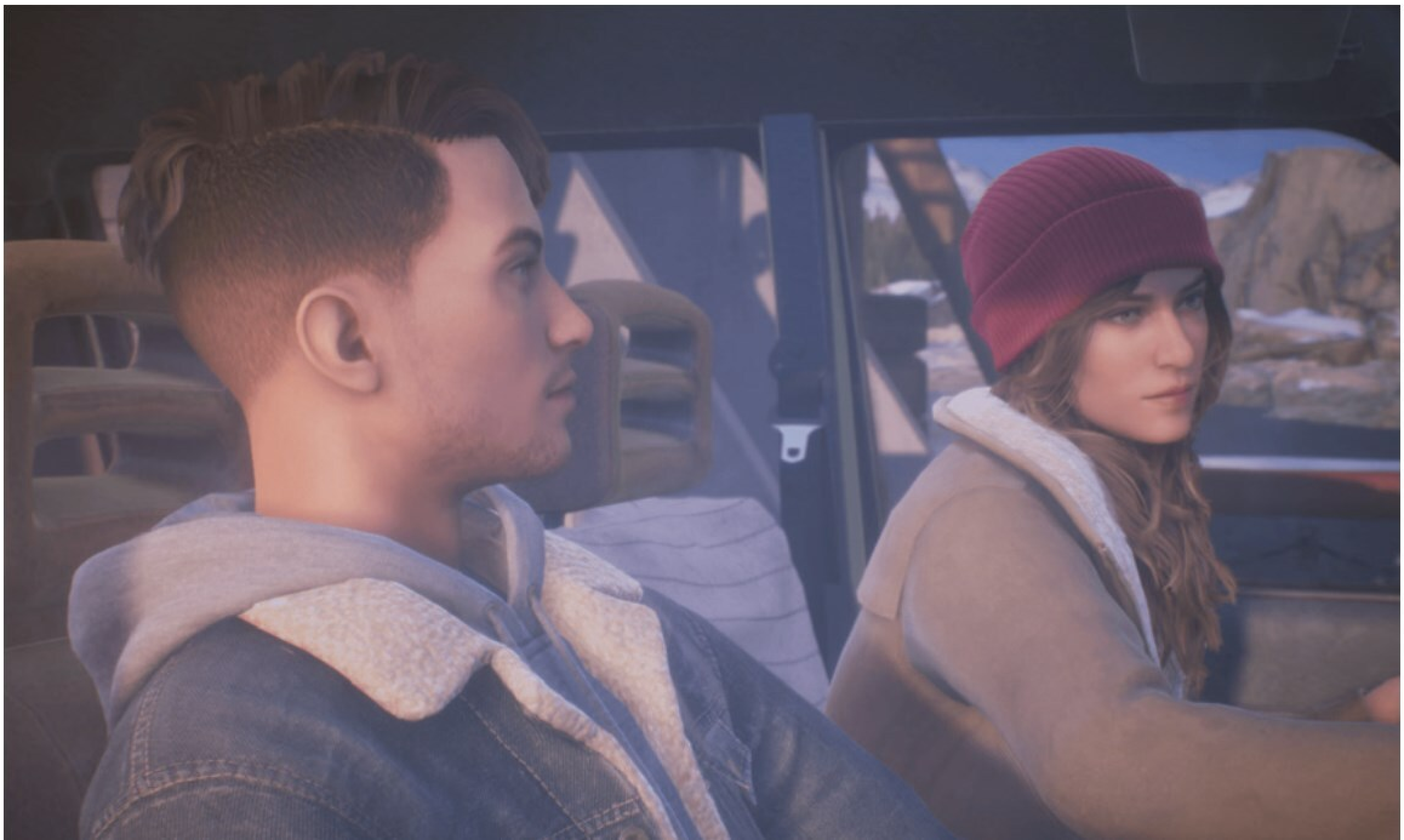
Tell Me Why takes place in small-town Alaska and follows siblings Tyler and Alyson. As twins, the pair have a strong bond and special connection where they can sense each other's thoughts and feelings. The narrative explores their complicated childhood, which Dontnod said has been "loving but troubled." The announcement trailer shows the pair revisiting a place from their childhood and heavily hints at a traumatic experience with their mother. It appears they're trying to get some closure and receive some answers surrounding their past.

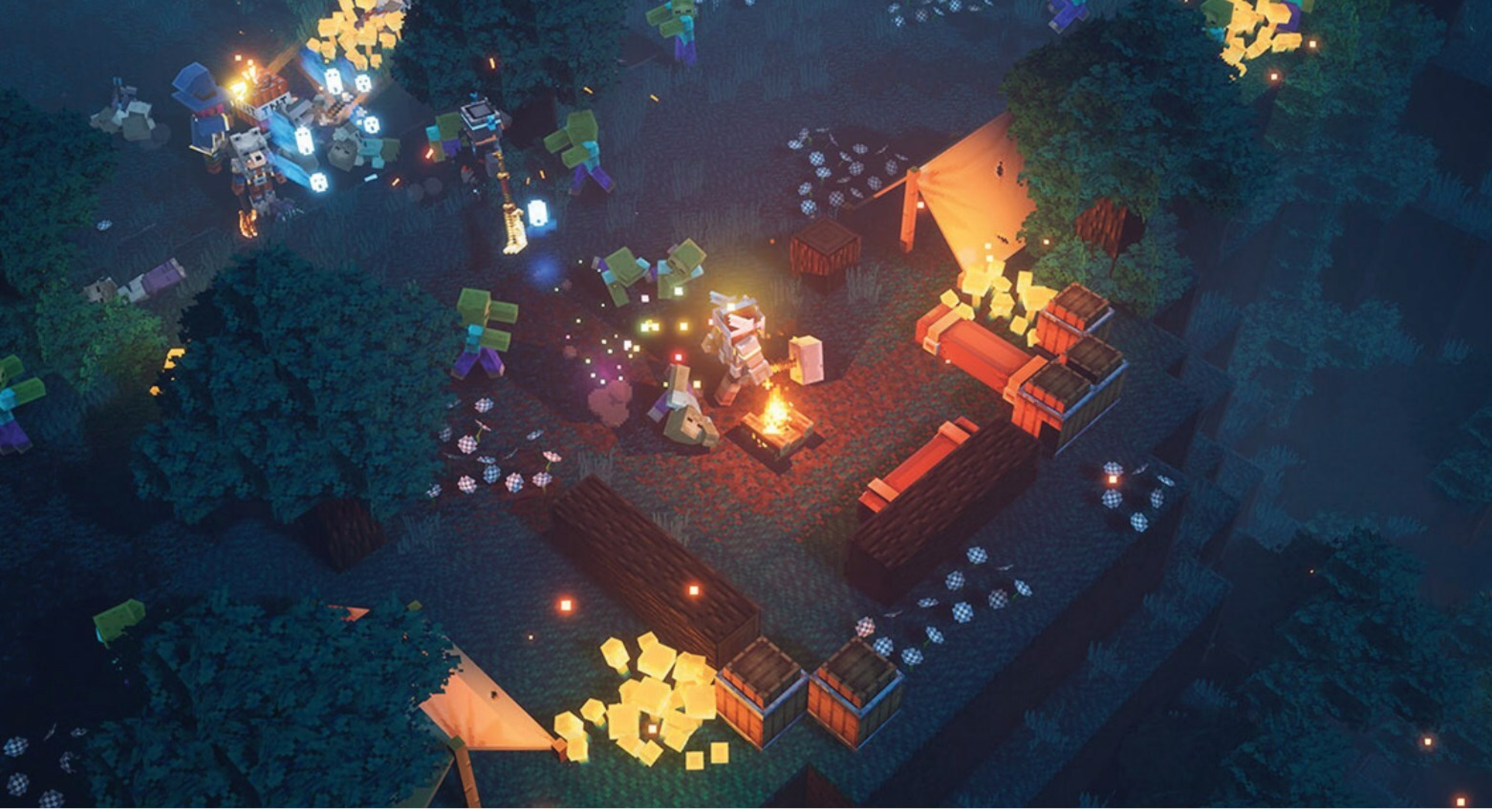
Over the course of the game, you play as both characters and tap into their memories from the perspective of each. "As the story unfolds, players delve into memories of pivotal events, as conveyed by Tyler and Alyson, and choose which memory to believe," director Florent Guillaume explained in a press release. "Players' choices determine the strength of the twins' bond, and the course their lives will take."

Tyler is a transgender man, and Dontnod enlisted the help of LGBTQ media advocacy organization GLAAD to ensure it accurately portrayed the trans experience and that the character also felt genuine and multi-dimensional. Nick Adams, director of transgender representation at GLAAD said: "Microsoft and Dontnod have approached Tyler with a real commitment to authenticity. Tyler is a fully realized, endearing character, whose story is not reduced to simplistic trans tropes. Creating a playable lead trans character – and taking such care to get it right – raises the bar for future LGBTQ inclusion in gaming."

Tell Me Why is composed of three chapters, all set to launch this summer. For those who hate the gaps in episodic releases, Microsoft and Dontnod are working closely to ensure this isn't an issue. "We listened closely to fans of narrative adventure games, and we heard loud and clear how painful unpredictable gaps between episodes can be," said Peter Wyse, general manager of Xbox Game Studios Publishing. He quickly followed it up by saying the entire story will hit on a regular, planned schedule.

Based on its initial trailer, Tell Me Why looks very heavy. Clearly, the twins have a lot of painful memories to confront, but what makes it interesting is seeing how they'll face them together and accept what happened in their life. » **Kimberley Wallace**





Minecraft Dungeons

Blocky dungeon crawling

» Platform
PS4 • Xbox One
Switch • PC

» Style
1-Player Action/
Role-Playing
(4-Player Online)

» Publisher
Xbox Game Studios

» Developer
Mojang, Double Eleven

» Release
April 2020

Ever since Minecraft released nearly a decade ago, players have been scouring the world for loot, taking down any zombie, creeper, or spider that dare get in their way. While crafting and destructible environments fall by the wayside in Minecraft Dungeons, those same elements of exploring and looting seamlessly carry over to the dungeon-crawling genre, while battling through mobs of enemies earns an even greater emphasis than in the original game.

Combat in Minecraft Dungeons is simple, with dedicated buttons for melee, dodge, ranged, and equipped items. Throwing down an area-of-effect shield to give me enough refuge to gulp down a healing potion and equip my newly acquired knife feels great, and my pet wolf helps immensely when I'm outnumbered and need to heal. Mixing in melee and ranged combat tactics is rewarding and exciting, providing enough variety to keep encounters interesting.

With most dungeon crawlers, you pick a class for the entirety of your experience. With Minecraft Dungeons, any character can pick up any weapon. "You can adapt if you find a difficult situation with your current equipped stuff," executive producer David Nisshagen. "I like to run around with lots of pets, but sometimes there are situations where pets are just miserable, like mazes or complex things where pets just can't keep up. So then you just re-equip to something else so you can go quickly from a tank archetype to a ranged archer archetype. You can just re-equip on the fly as you want to."

During my hands-on demo, I grabbed every weapon in sight since Minecraft Dungeons also provides a steady stream of better-than-your-current-weapon options. I thought I found a really strong sword, but just 10 minutes later, I'm shown just how weak it is when I pick up a knife that puts it to shame. "The things that you find get essentially obsolete over time as the difficulty ramps up," game director Måns Olson says. "The idea is that every 20 or 30 minutes, you will have changed all your gear completely and you play something new. That might be a new play style or you find new versions of what you had before if you prefer that."

As you play through the randomly generated dungeons, you solve minor puzzles, dodge environmental obstacles, and navigate labyrinthine corridors on your way to marked objectives. One sequence presents me with a locked door, which requires me to throw a switch, defeat a small group of enemies, then throw a sentient key on my back and carry it to the locked passageway. However, on my way back, several enemies with long-reaching spears spawn in my path, with a single hit causing me to drop the key, which then scurries in the opposite direction. Variations like this add small but distinct twists on encounters to help keep them fresh.

The idea of venturing through dungeons, picking up as much loot as humanly possible, and trading out old weapons for newly acquired firepower has already proven addicting and hugely popular. Add the Minecraft brand to that tried-and-true formula and Mojang may just have another winner on its hands. » **Brian Shea**

Age Of Empires IV

Going medieval in real time

» Platform
PC

» Style
1-Player Strategy
(Online TBA)

» Publisher
Xbox Game Studios

» Developer
Relic Entertainment

» Release
TBA

Initially revealed in 2017, Age of Empires IV has been largely absent from the public eye. However, during November's X019 event, we finally received our first glimpse of Age of Empires IV gameplay.

Set in the medieval times, the short trailer was action-packed, featuring hordes of infantry, swinging trebuchets, and crumbling castle walls. The action looks gorgeous in motion, showcasing the major technological leap that has occurred since Age of Empires III launched in 2005.

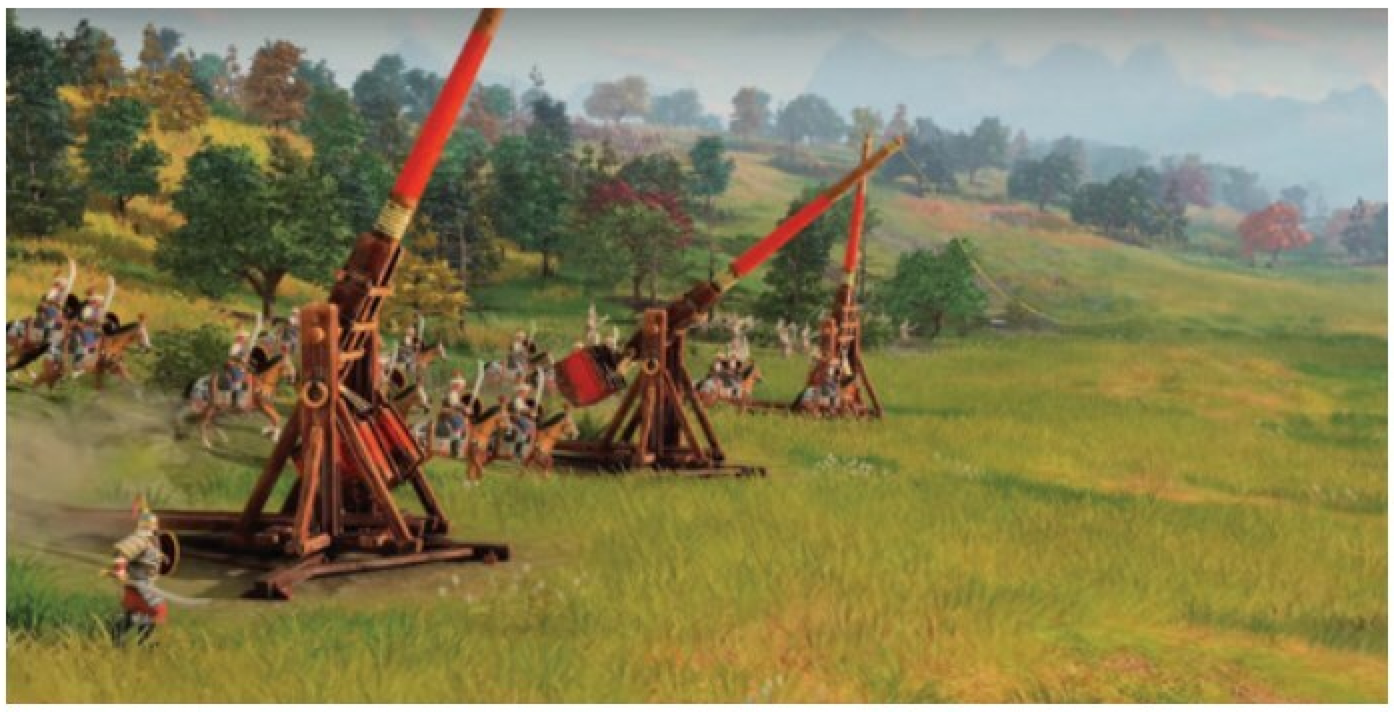
The decision to initially focus on the Middle Ages emerged from the fact it's a very accessible period for fans. "Not only do we have history with it, but it's fictionalized to the point where it's something that people just easily identify with," creative director of the Age of Empires franchise Adam Isgreen says. "There were so many stories we found we could tell in that time period that people really didn't have interesting perspective on. I can't go into detail on the campaign, but we're doing something very different with campaign in terms of the presentation. 'Humanized history' is the phrase that we use, and the idea is we want history to be delightful to anybody."

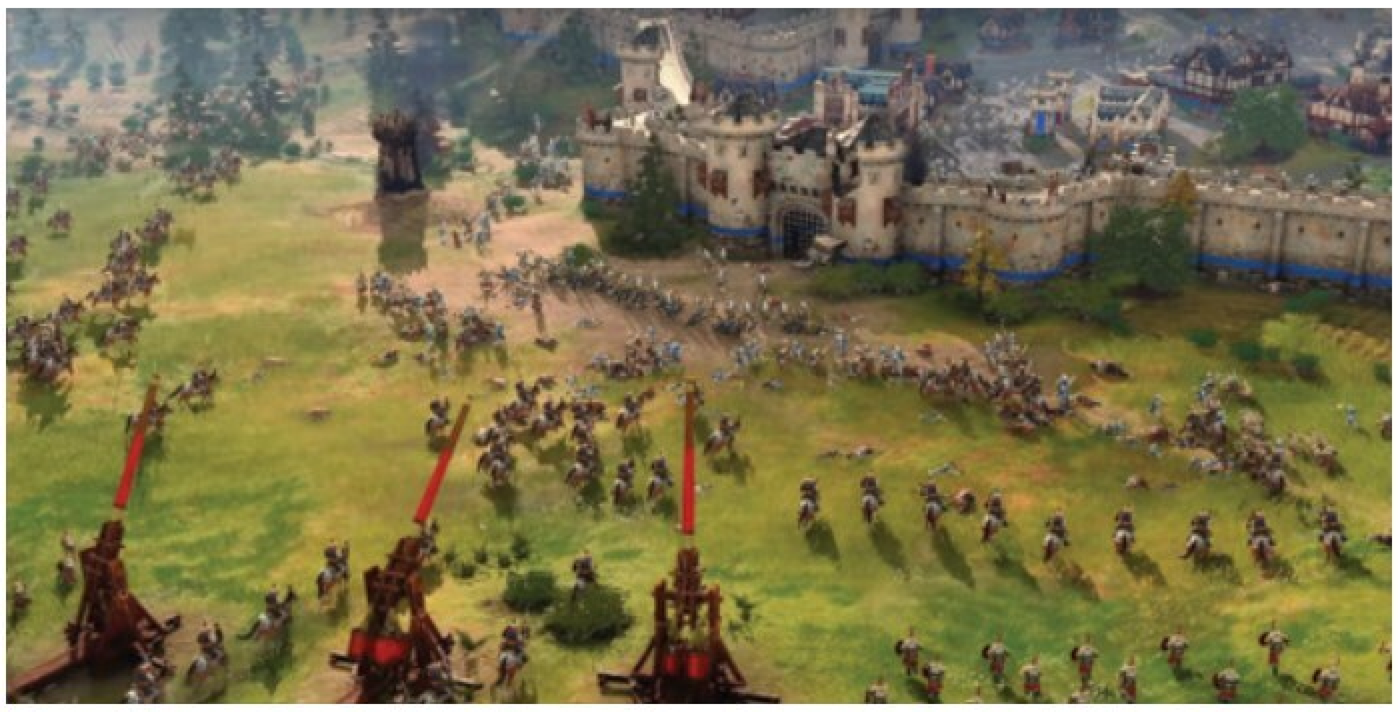
While the Middle Ages may be the starting point for Age of Empires IV, players should expect it to grow substantially after launch. "Age IV is a platform, really," Isgreen says. "We're starting in medieval times, but that doesn't mean we're necessarily going to be in medieval times as we roll through the game. Who knows what's going to happen in the future? A lot of that will be directed by our audience."

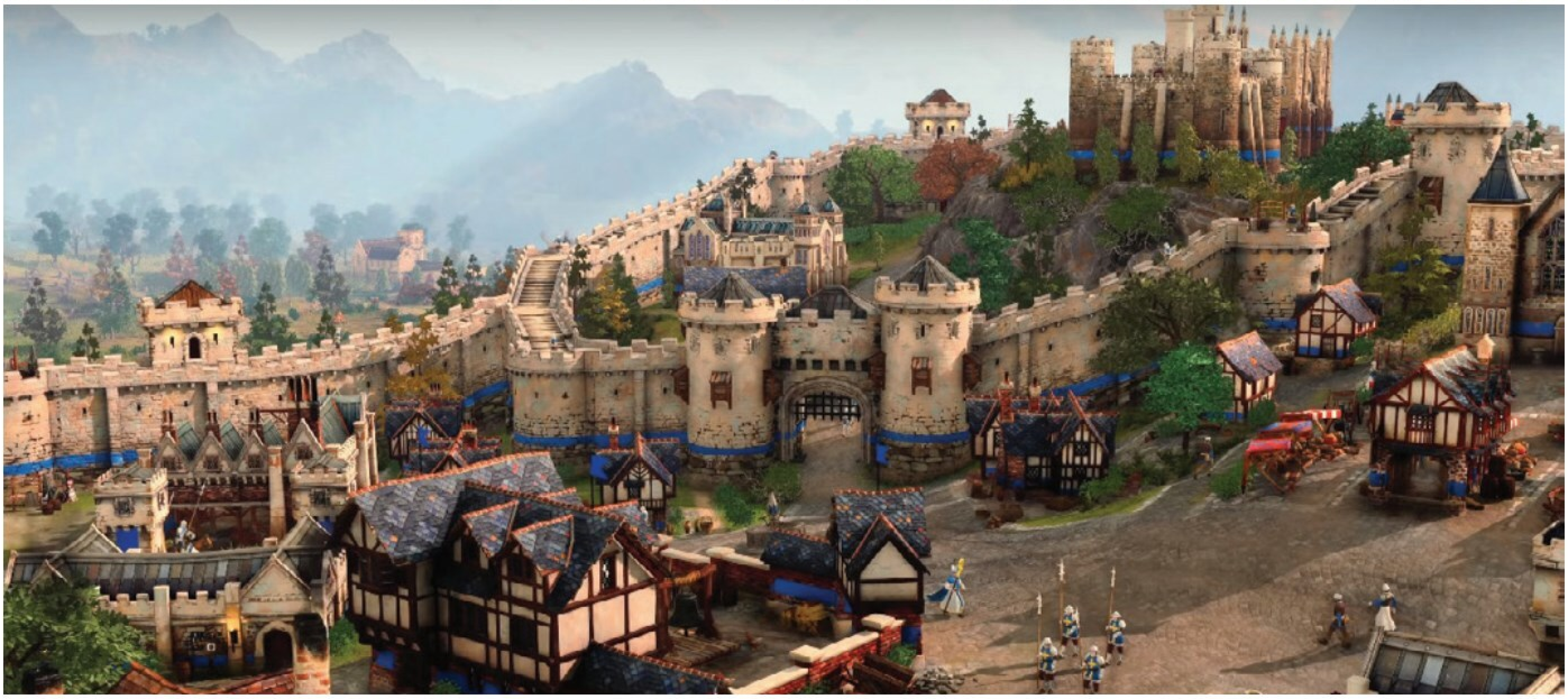
The debut trailer showcased two factions: the English and the Mongols. In previous Age of Empires titles, the civilizations have been fairly similar in how they work, with largely comparable units. "Age IV is not like that," Isgreen says. "The civs have some core rock-paper-scissors relationships, but the Mongols do not play anything like the English. The English intentionally are very comfortable to people coming in from other Age games. Then you get to things like the Mongols and some of the other civs and you're like, 'Whoa this doesn't play anything like an Age game has before.'"

Despite how good the brief trailer looked, some players were quick to point out things that were missing or off. However, while the teaser was real gameplay, it's not indicative of the final product. Instead, the Age of Empires IV team decided to only show things it knows it can deliver. One example was that cavalry weren't going into a charging animation, instead simply running up and attacking enemies. "I didn't like the way it was showing, so I didn't want to show it yet," Isgreen says. "Every time we show something, every time you see things in the game, you know they're real, and they work, and they're going to be there for shipping."

With the first details surrounding the title finally out in the open, now it's just a matter of waiting for the next information drop. Now, with Age of Empires II: Definitive Edition out the door, the loyal fanbase is focused squarely on the first all-new entry in a decade and a half. » **Brian Shea**

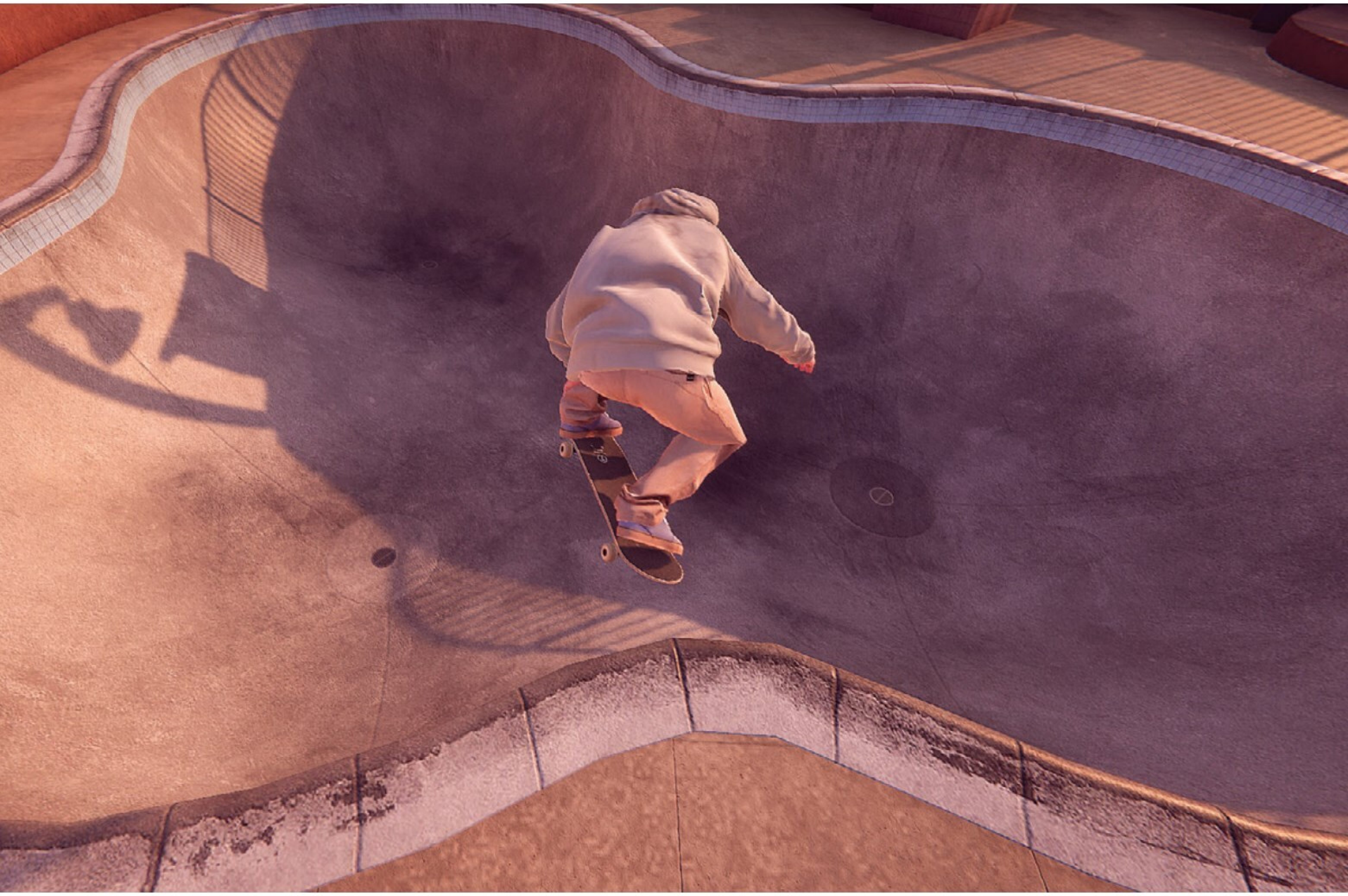






Skater XL

Expanding its repertoire



» Platform
Xbox One • Switch • PC

» Style
1-Player Action
(Online TBA)

» Publisher
Easy Day Studios

» Developer
Easy Day Studios

» Release
2020

Easy Day Studios is making steady progress toward Skater XL's 2020 release window; it's started a public beta for Steam Early Access members, showing off a new skatepark location in Encinitas as well as other new additions. The title's physics-influenced gameplay is both intuitive and has the potential to allow players to come up with their own trick combinations. Pulling off tricks involves using both analog sticks, and is an evolution from the venerable Skate franchise. Skater XL gives players the ability to control the board at multiple points in a trick instead of the gameplay consisting of a canned input sequence producing a canned response.

Trick tweaks, such as mid-air stops and letting flips develop longer if you have the time, are easy to do in the middle of a trick even if you didn't intend to do so at liftoff. In general, tricks feel good because the animations have a nice pop to them. The beta adds board grabs, with options like stalefish and mute grab, providing an extra amount of style.

The game's initial civic-center location was almost exclusively focused on street skating, but the new Encinitas Poods Park recreation adds more banks and transitions to try out those grabs during your aerial exploits. There's also a pool around the back that introduces its own style of gameplay. The tight transition, vert sections, and different floor depths make skating the pool a different experience than the traditional back-and-forth of a halfpipe or flying off a simple launcher. To accommodate this, pool skating requires a rhythmic pumping mechanic that is conducive to a nice carving motion – a style of skating that is emblematic of skateboarding's roots.

The beta also contains some nominal avatar gear to mix up your skater's look, but the biggest customization aspect comes from its support of map mods. Hopefully this feature is included in the final release (which could be tough for the consoles). The creative, DIY spirit is a big part of skateboarding, and would be a nice feather in the game's cap.

As Skater XL stands at the time of this writing, developer Easy Day Studios needs to continue to smooth out how your board, body, and the tricks you're performing interact with objects as you land. Sometimes your avatar or board might bounce off unexpectedly. There is time to work on aspects like this, and I'm also curious if there's any larger structure and/or progression in place as players spend time with the title.

It's been a while since we've had a good skateboarding title, and Skater XL is already heading in that direction thanks to its trick system centered around both creativity and control. Video game skateboarding has become synonymous with crazy tricks and over-the-top shenanigans, but all you really need is a board at your feet. **» Matthew Kato**

UDITION
USIC V

No Straight Roads

Finding your rhythm

When you think of music-focused games, you probably imagine button prompts flying toward you that you need to tap in time with a song. Malaysian developer Metronomik is deviating from that convention with its debut title, No Straight Roads. While rhythm is an important part of the experience, the controls and gameplay are more aligned with the action genre than traditional music titles.

We recently played a demo of No Straight Roads and saw its unconventional approach. It looks and plays like a third-person action game; you swap between two characters (or play co-op with a friend) as you run, jump, and attack from a third-person view. However, varied music tracks (like rock and EDM) run under everything and govern the unfolding action. For instance, enemies attack on the beat, and listening to the music carefully can help you anticipate moves and react.

One of the reasons behind this approach is to make rhythm games accessible to more players, without the barrier of strange controllers or strictly note-centric mechanics. “I believe that everyone has rhythm sense,” says Metronomik co-founder Wan Hazmer. “Sometimes it’s an input device that tells you you’re bad at rhythm; if I hand you a guitar, and you don’t know how to play, then you might tell yourself you have bad rhythm. All the music games, they have all these buttons for you to press, and you have to be very accurate.”

Early levels feature a mix of visual and audio cues to help you learn the mechanics, but as you progress, the audio elements become more critical to your success. Eventually, you are squaring off against enormous bosses in multi-stage bouts that require you to sharpen your reflexes and your hearing to triumph.

No Straight Roads uses familiar gameplay to help players tap into their intuitive sense of rhythm, and takes them through an adventure rather than a tracklist. With a cool concept, catchy soundtrack, and stylish art, this looks like an intriguing step in a new direction for music games. » **Joe Juba**

» Platform
PS4 • PC

» Style
1 or 2-Player Action

» Publisher
Sold Out

» Developer
Metronomik

» Release
2020

KartRider: Drift

Taking the corner fast

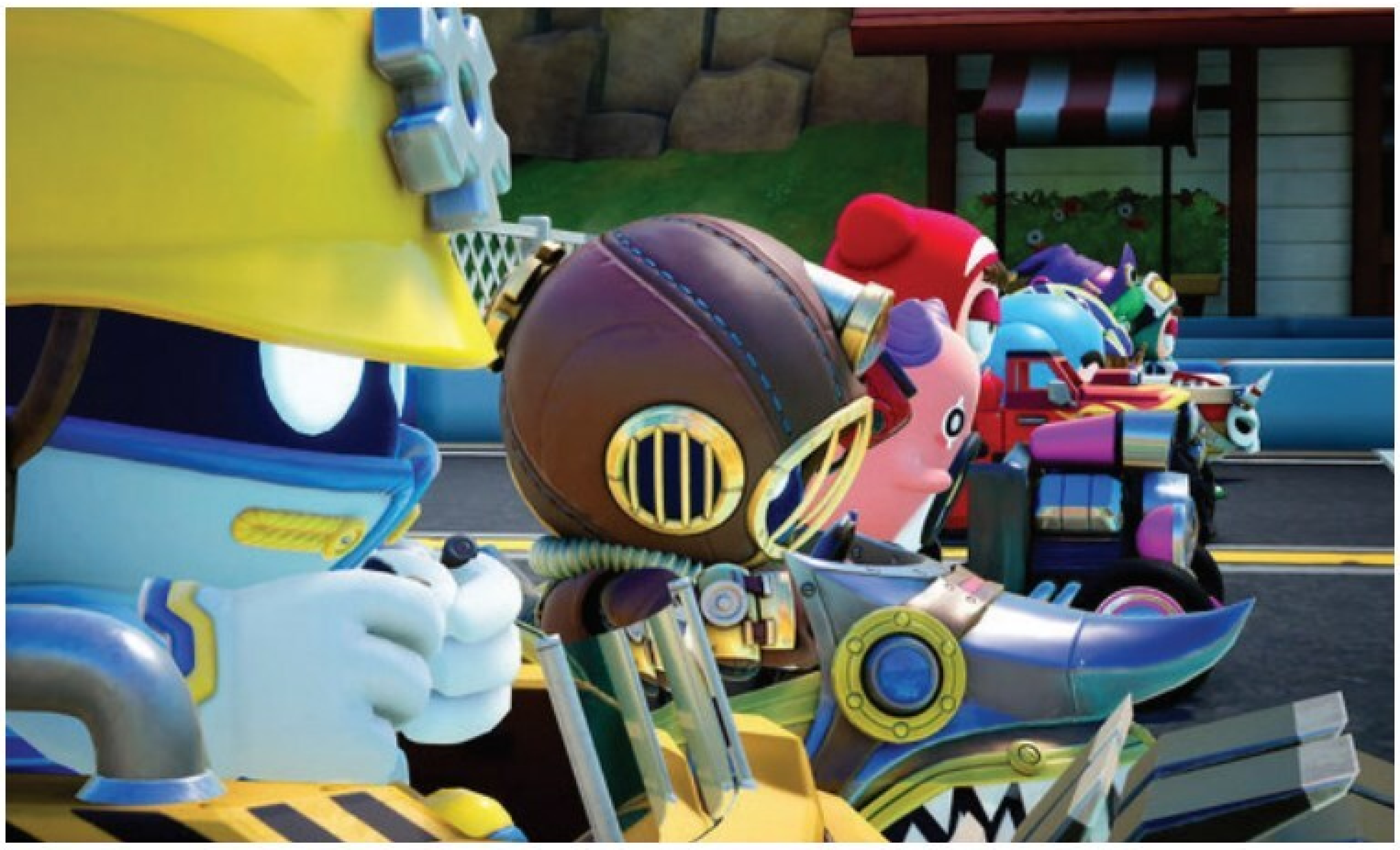
Since its inception, the kart-racing genre has been ruled by the series that popularized it. With a crowd of mascot-based racers chasing Mario Kart, Nexon is set to bring its long-running KartRider title to the West to see if it can find the same success it has found in Eastern markets.

As the name indicates, KartRider: Drift emphasizes taking corners at a rapid rate. Initiating a drift is at first jarring, as your car grips the road and turns sharper than I’ve seen in any other game in the genre. It’s tricky to get the hang of, but after a few turns, I was drifting around most corners with little problem.

I race through two modes: one focused on items, and another that rewards your drifting with boosts. The items available to players take obvious inspiration from the leading kart-racers with things like projectiles, bananas, and a first-place-seeking rocket, but I like some of the distinct weapons like a UFO and a bubble that suspends the target in mid-air. The boost-based race does away will all item boxes, but gives you a massive track to drift through.

While the team isn’t ready to talk about monetization for this free-to-play title, there will be season-based content drops, as well as different cosmetic items. Players can earn emotes, skins, and more through gameplay, but there will be a way to purchase them as well. The build I played only had three characters, a few skins, and a handful of karts to choose from, but the development team tells me that those numbers will grow fast once the game is out.

With no cost of entry, KartRider: Drift has the potential to attract a large audience. It might not threaten to dethrone Mario Kart as the genre leader, but it looks like a fun addition to the field. » **Brian Shea**



» Platform
Xbox One • PC

» Style
1-Player Racing
(8-Player Online)

» Publisher
Nexon America Inc.

» Developer
Nexon Korea
Corporation

» Release
2020

Persona 5 Royal

Providing more Phantom Thieves goodness

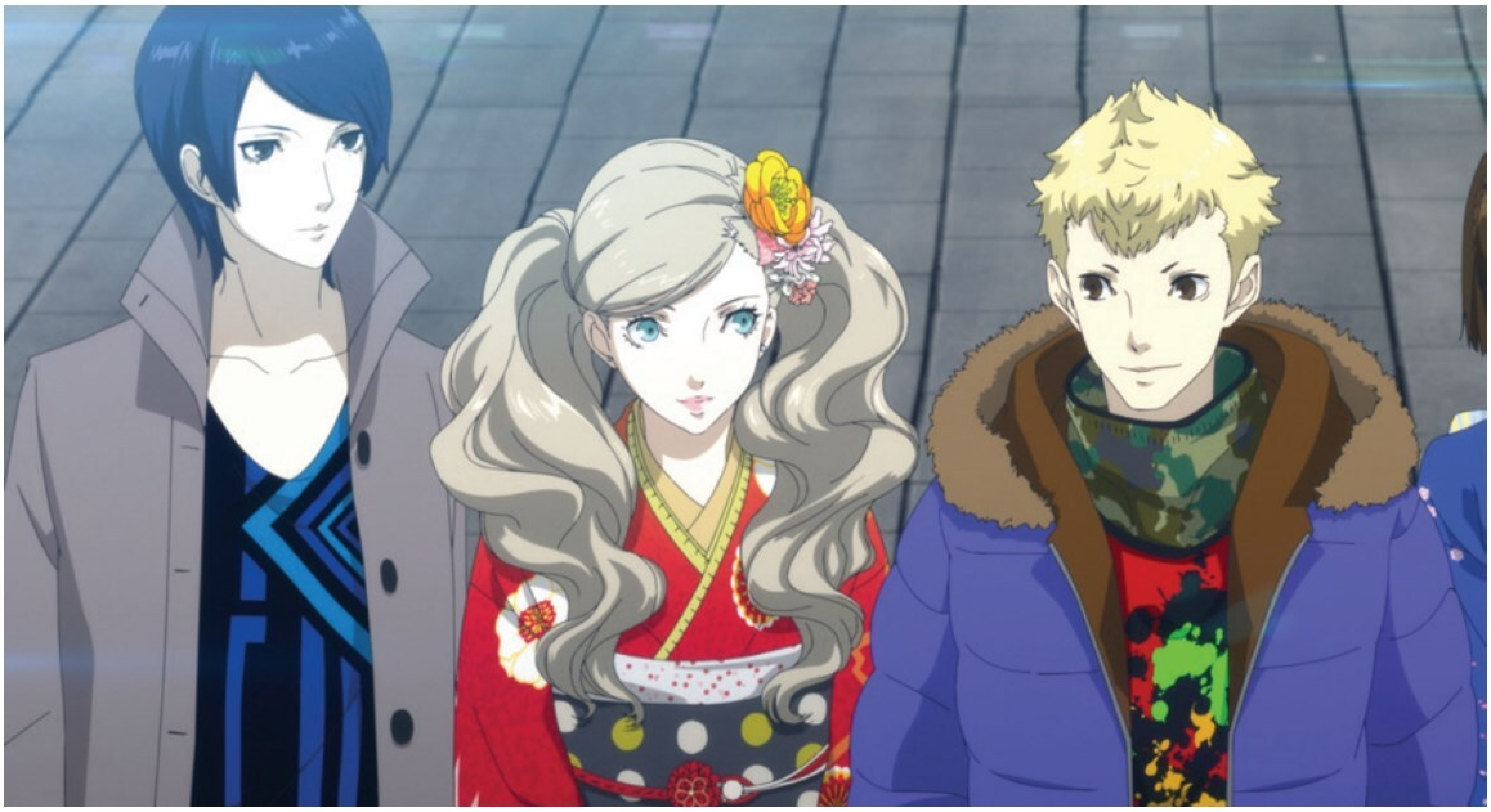
» Platform
PS4 • Switch

» Style
1-Player Action/
Role-Playing

» Publisher
Atlus

» Developer
Omega Force, Atlus

» Release
March 31



Persona 5 took the series to a new level, becoming its best-selling game with over 2.7 million copies moved. It earned PlayStation's Greatest Hits status and main character Joker even made his way to Super Smash Bros. Ultimate. Now Atlus is leveling it up once again with a new edition comparable to a director's cut. Royal offers plenty of new content (Atlus says a 30-percent increase), giving fans more than enough reason to rejoin the Phantom Thieves while also offering newcomers a chance to experience the game in its best form.

While Royal contains plenty of tweaks, such as stylish new attacks and fresh Persona fusion options, its biggest addition is an extra school term that takes the tale beyond the original school ending, providing several new ways for the game to conclude. Some new faces appear, with the most prominent being Kasumi, a transfer student, whose arcana is Faith, giving her magic attacks with bless damage. She can heal as well, but she's more geared toward high-damage, physical attacks.

In addition, part-time school counselor Takuto is a new confidant who has great listening skills and fantastic advice to match. Spending time with him opens up various buffs for the team in battle. You also have some new scenery, with more places to visit around Tokyo, like Nakano and Shinagawa. Atlus teased that visiting them might allow you to see new sides to characters. Tons of events have been added, with more school trips and vacations for new group interactions, to complement the experience.

Some small gameplay tweaks also enhance the title. A new palace opens once you get to the new semester, and more powerful shadows with rare items now roam dungeons. You can now customize your guns, upping the accuracy rate and adding status ailments to them. The Velvet Room is also receiving some new lifeblood. Shin Megami Tensei fans will immediately recognize the new persona you can fuse: Fafnir. This is the great dragon's first appearance in a Persona game since Persona 2: Eternal Punishment. Making bigger and badder personas just got easier, thanks to incense which allows you to train them further. And if you want to test your skills for some worthwhile prizes, challenge battles let you face off against various enemies with different conditions in an arena, earning you new items and better equipment.

Lastly, you can customize your own palace with a new element, placing items and decorations in it. You earn various medals by meeting objectives in your day-to-day activities, which in turn can be used to purchase new decor. Here, you can also listen to your favorite songs, participate in minigames, and hear unique conversations with your confidants.

Persona 5 Royal looks to be making a great experience even better, and we can't wait to see what the new semester and characters add to the journey. The game recently launched in Japan and is receiving positive reviews for the new content and smoother gameplay, but also has been criticized for its price point, retailing at the cost of a new game when it feels more like an expansion. » **Kimberley Wallace**

VICTO
354 191
HP 386/ SP 203
375 155
342 163

The Mysterious José

José is another new character, but you'll primarily interact with him in Mementos. With a gray star-patterned raincoat and half-egg shaped hair, he seems interesting. When we last interviewed character designer Shigenori Soejima, he teased: "I think you'll understand the reasoning behind the design once you play. [José] doesn't really look human …" So far all we know is that José is trying to better understand humans, and he'll ask you to collect things, like flowers and stamps, scattered around Mementos. These can then be exchanged for powerful accessories or battle bonuses such as more XP or money.

Project Sakura Wars

A surprising comeback to celebrate

Sakura Wars has always been an interesting blend of a visual novel, dating sim, and tactical RPG. Sadly, the series has been on the backburner since 2010's Sakura Wars: So Long My Love, which was the first-ever entry to hit the West. After a decade of silence, the franchise is back with its sixth mainline entry, which is also acting as a soft reboot of the series.

Set in Tokyo during a fictionalized version of the Taishō period, the World Combat Revue Organization, a name fans will recognize, fights to maintain the peace. The fate of the world is in their hands when a new threat complicates things. You play as Japanese navy captain Seijuro Kamiyama, who now leads the Floral Division of the Imperial Combat Revue of Tokyo. Kamiyama must team up with a group of fierce women in his division, from a ninja prodigy to a shrine maiden. Just like in past games, you build up your trust levels with characters, and when you reach key story points, critical choices with an imposed time limit hit, forcing you to react in the moment and live with your decisions.

True to the series' formula, the game is split between social and battle segments and the relationships you build – especially how you grow those aforementioned trust levels, can impact battle parameters and open up cooperative attacks. For this entry, the combat is going in a more action-oriented direction. You alternate between controlling the main character and your team members' mechs, doling out combos and special attacks, with the ability to dodge, jump, or even wall run. Every character's mech has unique abilities; for instance, one can round up all the enemies in front of them on the battlefield for one big attack to clear them out.

With impactful social interactions and cool mech combat, Project Sakura Wars looks promising, and I'm glad the series is making a comeback. If history is anything to go by, this adventure should be anything but ordinary, and that's why it's worth putting on your radar. » **Kimberley Wallace**

» **Platform**
PS4

» **Style**
1-Player Role-Playing

» **Publisher**
Sega

» **Developer**
Sega,
Red Entertainment

» **Release**
Spring

Persona 5 Scramble: The Phantom Strikes

Hacking and slashing enemies in style

Like many popular Japanese series before it (i.e., Fire Emblem and The Legend of Zelda), Persona is getting the Dynasty Warriors treatment. Persona 5 Scramble is a sequel to the main game, featuring its core cast with a few new faces thrown in. Omega Force and Atlus are also working hard to give it that Persona flair, taking it beyond the standard musou experience and transforming it into a story-heavy journey with the character development we've come to expect.

Set six months after Persona 5, Scramble transports the Phantom Thieves to an alternate version of Tokyo. For their summer vacation, the group hits the road in an RV, traveling to different areas to learn more about their culture. But things take a turn when our heroes discover shadows are turning people unconscious and stealing their hearts. The team vows to get to the bottom of this and save those all over Japan. Lending a hand is a new character named Sophia, who has the power to defeat shadows with a cool Persona that carries a yo-yo and blaster. While Sophia is strong with recovery skills, she has one little problem: She's lost her memory.

Scramble marks the first time the series will adopt action-oriented gameplay. As expected, our heroes stylishly hack and slash through massive waves of shadows. Scramble also still keeps the heart and soul from previous mainline entries alive with all-out attacks and a focus on exploiting enemy weaknesses; trailers have even shown off some turn-based elements to activate certain skills. Persona negotiation and fusion are also on the table, but we still don't know exactly how it will all work.

Right now, the game is set to launch in Japan this February, but we still don't have any word on a North American release. But with the massive popularity of Persona 5 in the West, it's likely Scramble eventually finds its way to our shores.
» **Kimberley Wallace**

» **Platform**
PS4 • Switch

» **Style**
1-Player Action/
Role-Playing

» **Publisher**
Atlus

» **Developer**
Omega Force, Atlus

» **Release**
TBD

reviews

gameinformer GAME OF THE MONTH

80 Disco Elysium

Even if you're familiar with the "detective battling his personal demons" archetype, you've never seen it presented like Disco Elysium. This narrative-driven RPG starts as a murder mystery, but blossoms into a surprising profile of a delusional man and his disastrous personality. As you explore a fictional city and piece together clues, you also contend with the warring facets of your detective's mind – all represented as separate entities with comments and advice to consider. This core concept is supported by developer ZA/UM's clever writing and fascinating world, making Disco Elysium an experience you absolutely should not miss.

THE SCORING SYSTEM

10	Outstanding. A truly elite title that is nearly perfect in every way. This score is given out rarely and indicates a game that cannot be missed.	5	Flawed. It may be obvious that the game has lots of potential, but its most engaging features could be undeniably flawed or not integrated into the experience.
9	Superb. Just shy of gaming nirvana, this score is a high recommendation because the game reviewed is head-and-shoulders above its competition.	4	Bad. While some things work as planned, the majority of this title either malfunctions or it is so dull that the game falls short as a whole.
8	Very Good. Innovative, but perhaps not the right choice for everyone. This score indicates that there are many good things to be had, but arguably so.	3	Painful. If there is anything that's redeeming in a game of this caliber, it's buried beneath agonizing gameplay and uneven execution in its features or theme.
7	Average. The game's features may work, but are nothing that even casual players haven't seen before. A decent game from beginning to end.	2	Broken. Basically unplayable. This game is so insufficient in execution that any value would be derived in extremely small quantities, if at all.
6	Limited Appeal. Although there may be fans of games receiving this score, many will be left yearning for a more rewarding game experience.	1	Paint chips and dip.

AWARDS

gameinformer PLATINUM	Awarded to games that score between 9.75 and 10
gameinformer GOLD	Awarded to games that score between 9 and 9.5
gameinformer SILVER	Awarded to games that score between 8.5 and 8.75
gameinformer GAME OF THE MONTH	The award for the most outstanding game in the issue

For more information on the age classification ratings in our reviews, head to gameinformer.com/ratings

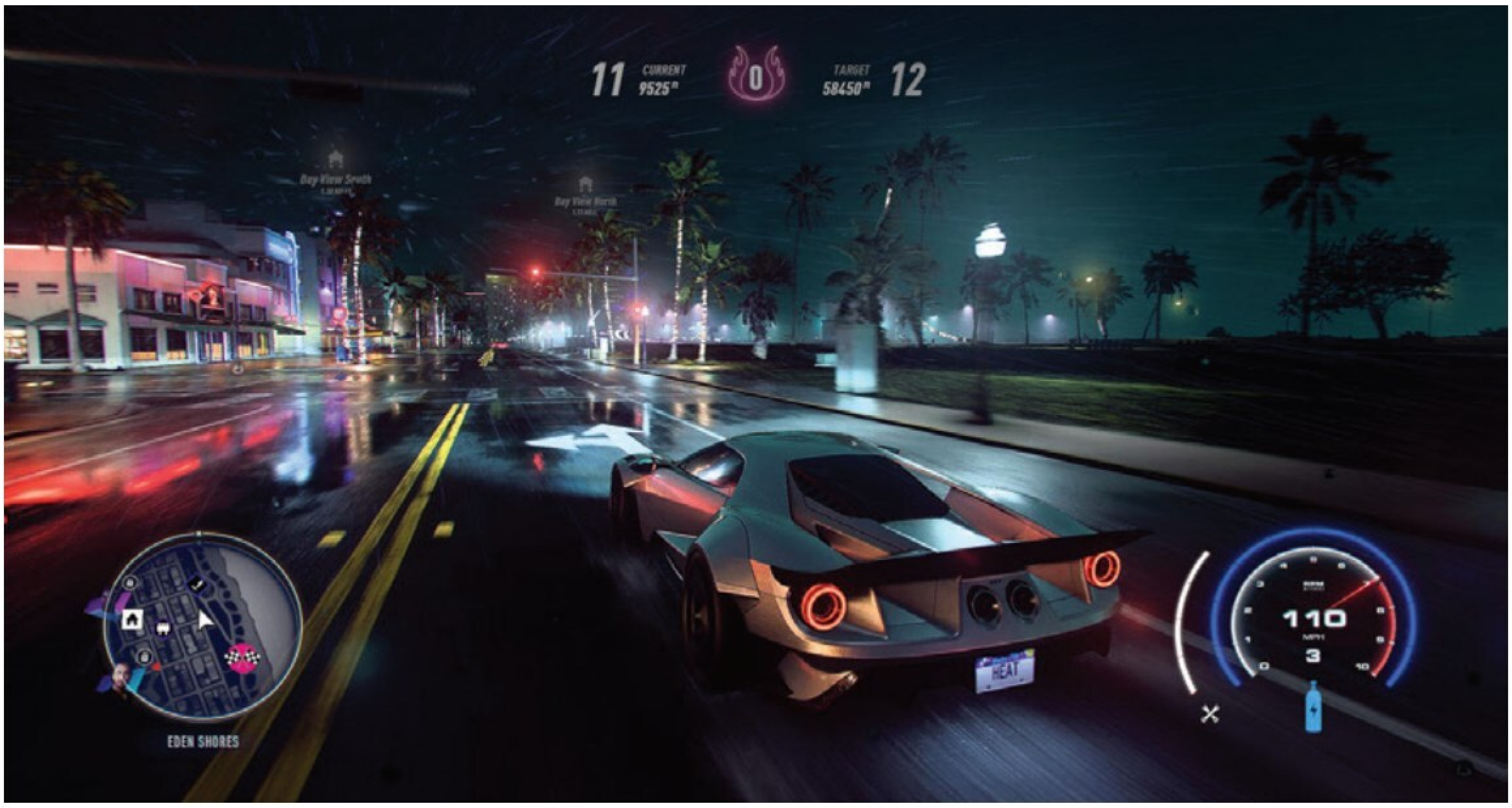
Need For Speed Heat

The return of the reboot

Style 1-Player Racing (8-Player Online) **Publisher** Electronic Arts **Developer** Ghost Games **Release** November 8 **Rating** M

8

PS4 • Xbox One • PC



The Need for Speed franchise is back from a brief hiatus after the failure of 2017's Need for Speed Payback. During that time, developer Ghost Games has refocused and concentrated on the series' core: cops, high speeds, world exploration, and customization – with a hokey story thrown in for old times' sake. Need for Speed Heat has its flaws (its cop integration could be better), but it's a rousing return that delivers on many of the franchise's touchstones.

While the story of street racers going up against corrupt cops is forgettable, the day/night cycle that governs your activities is appealing. You earn money during the day and reputation points at night. You need both currencies to progress. Cops are more active at night and take chunks of money and rep if you're caught. Meanwhile, you earn progressively more rep for stringing races together and attracting police attention, so it's fun to tempt fate with "one more race" before parking it for the night at the nearest safe house.

Even with the threat of arrest, the police in NFS Heat take a slight backseat to racing other street racers (online or A.I.). The cops can be formidable, marshaling ramming trucks and more to bring you down, but they're easy to escape when they chase you in the middle of a race event. Also, they are only a nuisance now and again because there aren't enough set-piece moments to amp up their power and presence.

Palm City, which has Miami-like streets, industrial areas, and broad hills made for drifting, contains more than just race events. Finding collectibles and performing mini-challenges like smashing billboards, going through speed traps, and taking on technical time-trial courses dole out rewards. Money and reputation multipliers are also passively earned when joining an online crew. The more everyone races the more everyone earns.

Need for Speed's gameplay is centered on arcade racing, but I enjoy how it still demands a racer's touch. The plethora of events in the world are suited toward different styles of racing such as drifting and long high-speed sprints, and so are the cars' basic driving characteristics and upgrades. I liked having to change my driving mentality and car depending on the circumstance. There were times when I could out-muscle the competition by the sheer superiority of my cars' horsepower. However, the more satisfying moments were when I won with an underpowered car because I knew how to race the course according to my ride's characteristics.

For example, high-end speed isn't as important in a circuit race filled with tight turns. Instead, I cornered correctly to win. Conversely, the long sprint races are about maintaining top speed over long distances with drifting required around the tighter corners. You have more time to make up lost ground, but there's also more traffic to plow into.

Overall, Heat does a great job balancing numerous factors to keep the racing flowing and exciting. Traffic density, what you can/cannot crash through alongside the road, the ability to cut corners when necessary, and even a little bit of rubberbanding, all come into play but don't drag the game down or make it frustrating.

Car part upgrades run the gamut of standard (crankshaft, exhaust, etc.) to very useful, such as auxiliary parts that weaken the police's radar. Upgrades like tires and suspension are also instrumental in shaping vehicle characteristics to make them more suitable for specific race types – a nice component in step with the gameplay. Cosmetic changes like editable decal layers and underglow effects are also worth spending in-game money on (there are no microtransactions), helping make your investments feel worthwhile. Overall, I liked upgrading existing cars in my garage (and therefore become more attached to them) as well as having to buy new ones occasionally to keep up with the game's difficulty.

Need for Speed has meant different things over the years, but Heat is a good all-around representation of the franchise. The police could be a little more prominent, and the world – while well stocked – isn't as interesting as Forza Horizon's, for instance, but NFS Heat is the best iteration since Ghost Games' reboot in 2015. » **Matthew Kato**

» **Concept**
Palm City hums with activities set in the day or night while corrupt cops keep a lookout

» **Graphics**
NFS Heat pops with neon splashes and water-slicked streets. Best of all, the game is consistently smooth

» **Sound**
Small touches, such as being able to customize your cars' exhaust sound, and the fact that your character actually speaks during cutscenes, are very welcome

» **Playability**
I enjoy that different kinds of cars are suited to specific types of races, which changes how you approach driving and upgrading them

» **Entertainment**
The game's day/night structure is part of a compelling structure that makes NFS Heat a solid entry in the franchise

» **Replay Value**
Moderately high

Star Wars Jedi: Fallen Order

A turbulent thrill ride

8.75

PS4 • Xbox One • PC

» **Concept**
A journey of discovery unfolds in a sprawling, open-ended adventure that succeeds in both story and action

» **Graphics**
The amount of detail on display in every area is incredible. However, enemy animations can be tricky to read, and some texture popping occurs

» **Sound**
The orchestrated score, BD-1's unique chirps, and all of the voice work are superb and make for a hell of an aural Star Wars experience

» **Playability**
Traversal is slick, allowing players to run along walls, double jump, and use the Force to pull a vine to them with ease. Lightsaber combat is fluid and intense, but feels a little unpolished

» **Entertainment**
Jedi: Fallen Order tells a new Star Wars story and takes players to new places. It sits nicely alongside the *Rebels* and *Resistance* TV shows, which also dare to be different

» **Replay Value**
Moderately high

gameinformer SILVER

Style 1-Player Action/Adventure **Publisher** Electronic Arts **Developer** Respawn Entertainment **Release** November 15 **Rating** T

A raw, untamed power courses through Star Wars Jedi: Fallen Order. Much like a Padawan in training, this game is a student of the Force, not a master. The lightsaber is used skillfully, twirling in exhilarating ways to chop down Imperial troops, and the Force flows into acrobatic movements, but the Padawan's motions are rough and unrefined. This inexperience fits with the story of a Jedi losing touch with the Force, but is more of a reflection of Jedi: Fallen Order missing a coat of polish.

Jedi: Fallen Order reminds me of Naughty Dog's first Uncharted game: an ambitious action experience that was just a little off in its delivery. Respawn has made a game that is every bit as ambitious, and despite showing a little sloppiness in execution, is an enthralling and fully featured Star Wars experience, hitting with a commanding bang in its cinematic presentation, environmental exploration, and journey shared between a Jedi and his droid.

The first shot of the game sets the tone for the entire adventure. We see a junkyard filled with giant derelict starships being dismantled by the Empire for parts. TIE fighters roar into view, and the camera pans to show the immense scale of this sequence. The detail showcased is impressive, looking like an expensive shot from a new Star Wars film. The orchestration that swells in this moment is also reminiscent of John Williams' work, again making it feel like an epic cinematic experience.

Just when it would seem Respawn is following George Lucas' formula, the soundtrack switches to something different with a throaty alien singer that doesn't sound like typical Star Wars. We then meet protagonist Cal Kestis, who is listening to this strange song through a pair of headphones as he works. This moment screams of something new, which Jedi: Fallen Order embraces fully. Sure, you see stormtroopers, a few familiar faces, and a Jedi learning the ways of the Force, but we see these iconic elements through the lens of new characters, worlds, and story ideas.

Cal is immediately likeable as a conflicted soul, and is brought to life nicely by actor Cameron Monaghan. Cal's cohort, a droid named BD-1, is equally as fun to get to know, resembling a friendly lapdog more than any other droid in Star Wars. They have a playful banter and experience hardships with one another, and their bond forms the foundation for a hell of an adventure. They explore ancient shrines looking for clues that could hold the answer to resurrecting the Jedi Order. The mystery keeps the story engaging, as does the well-defined threat of the Inquisitors, Jedi-slayers who are hunting Cal and always seem to be one step ahead of him. Excellently penned flashbacks are sewn into this nicely paced narrative to add extra dimensions to the characters.

The one area where the story stumbles is in revisiting previously explored worlds for narrative reasons. As exciting as it is to spelunk deep into Dathomir's witch tombs or see the untamed beauty of Kashyyyk, the reasons to return to these planets seem like a bit of a stretch. "The door's locked. Oh well. Let's leave and see if we can find a way to open it on another planet." That said, I enjoyed veering off the story path to explore worlds on my own, since players can freely go to whichever one they want.

Jedi: Fallen Order's most dynamic and entertaining quality is exploration. Cal begins the game with basic human abilities, but quickly remembers how to run along walls, double jump, and use the Force to push and pull objects. He taps into his gifts to navigate treacherous ground in finely crafted open environments filled with soaring verticality, snaking paths, and plenty of thrilling platforming and combat challenges. Cal's acrobatic movements are reliable and easy to read, and should you fall, the game doesn't punish you. You just take some damage and get another shot. Most of Cal's actions fit into the Jedi playbook, but Respawn went a little too far in its attempts to create dynamic action, like lengthy Super Mario 64-like slippery slopes and odd gelatinous bouncy pads that don't really scream "Star Wars."

Although you spend some time retracing steps through environments, shortcuts are placed in convenient spots and are filled with secrets galore, such as additional stim canisters, outfits and ponchos for Cal, and paint schemes for BD-1 and the crew's ship, the *Stinger Mantis*. The stim canisters are incredibly valuable, as the game is challenging (even on the default difficulty) and I usually found my health to be in the red, hoping another checkpoint is nearby.

Combat isn't the central focus of Jedi: Fallen Order, and I was surprised (and pleased) that Respawn didn't throw in encounters just to up the intensity at times. Stretches of play are without them and that pacing works well for the adventure aspects. Battles are where the biggest thrills and problems reside. Swinging the lightsaber feels damn good; it's fast, powerful, and delivers big results, like slicing rampaging beasts clean in two. Respawn's decision to make combat more of a defensive game also pays dividends in terms of strategy and flow. I like that the fights are deliberately paced, and allow for multiple targets to be engaged at once, such as exchanging lightsaber blows with a purge trooper and then in between swings using Force Push to send a rocket back at a stormtrooper. You don't just run into a room and start swinging. You strategize and pick at them carefully. Timed parries can be tricky, but should you succeed, they reward you with a big hit or instant kill that looks amazing.

The combat ideas are sound and lead to some awesome moments that make you feel like a true Jedi. However, the enemies can throw a kink into your plans, as some of their movements are not telegraphed well, and you sometimes see animation hitches that can't be predicted. Additionally, archers and snipers frequently freeze up and won't fire at you, leading to a strange showdown where nothing is happening for 15 to 20 seconds. More troubling, I ran into issues with BD-1 not healing me, although Cal audibly calls for it, leading to several frustrating deaths (especially against the grueling end-game bosses). Given how many ledges are in most worlds, don't be surprised if a combat encounter is interrupted by Cal getting knocked off a cliff and then magically reappearing to lock sabers again. It's jarring, and speaks volumes to the combat being a little rough overall. The visuals, while stunning in composition, can sometimes be affected by texture pop-in, lighting not displaying correctly, or enemies quickly dropping into place as a door is opened.

Despite these problems, Respawn's maiden voyage with Star Wars is largely a success. I couldn't put this game down, both for the thrill of exploring and wanting to see where the story took me next. The inspirations taken from Dark Souls, Uncharted, and Metroid Prime unite to create something unique that just happens to work incredibly well for this beloved license. Like most starships in this universe, Jedi: Fallen Order could use a little polish, but the rust doesn't hold it back from roaring with excitement.

» **Andrew Reiner**

Lonely Mountains Downhill

Serene velocity

8.75

PS4 • Xbox One • PC

» Concept
Race your mountain bike down peaceful mountain trails at breakneck speed

» Graphics
Low-poly, high-color graphics are attractive and provide readable pathing

» Sound
Quiet, ambient nature sounds accompany your frantic descent – a simple design choice that does wonders for the aesthetic and enjoyability

» Playability
Precise controls allow for skill and improvisation, but some aspects of the long-term unlock approach are frustrating

» Entertainment
Somehow simultaneously soothing and thrilling, this excellent arcade-style experience captures the joys of biking, nature, and competing against yourself

» Replay Value
High

gameinformer SILVER

Style 1-Player Action **Publisher** Thunderful Games **Developer** Megagon Industries **Release** October 23 **Rating** E10+

A gentle wind rustles the autumn leaves, and an owl's solitary call echoes across the mountainside in the pre-dusk light. My bike rattles across an old wooden bridge, and the path ahead curves around the rising roar of the waterfall. Instead of following it, I accelerate off the cliff at ill-advised speed, and crash headlong into a tree trunk, just missing the jump. Time to restart the checkpoint

Such is the flow of Lonely Mountains: Downhill, an idyllic mountain biking game of nature sounds and beautiful vistas juxtaposed against excessive speed and foolhardy jumps. 16 trails across four mountain landscapes all start the same: Your bike and rider are poised at the peak, ready to descend. From here, it's all about the path to your cozy base camp, bumping and sliding down gravel switchbacks, dirt slides, hidden tree paths, and waterlogged streambeds. Can you beat your best time to the bottom? Can you manage fewer crashes this time? That simple formula carries the game forward, while the precise controls and many shortcuts add depth to ensure you come back for more.

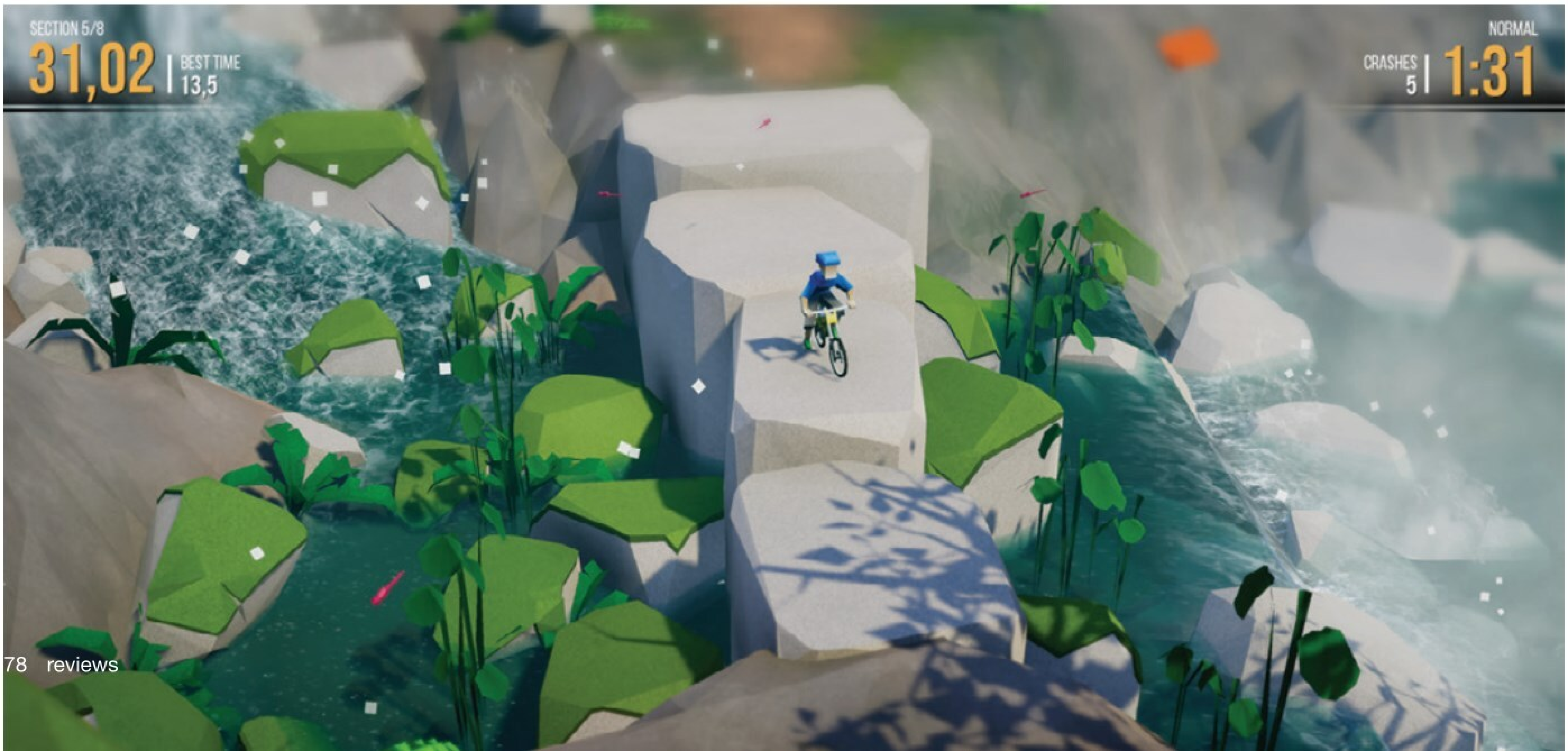
Gameplay owes a debt to classics like Marble Madness and its isometric view of the slope, as well as the time-trial optimization of the long-running Trials series. However, the injection of a Zen-like natural landscape and soundscape sets these lonely mountains apart. The ambient nature soundtrack is an inspired choice, and the low-poly but vibrantly colorful visuals perfectly capture the hazy sense of speeding down a hill as the background details blur together.

In any given run, you're challenging yourself to beat time thresholds by any means necessary, hitting the finish line with a cleaner run, or both. The objectives are limited in scope; without more variety in targeted goals, the potential for tedium can set in over time. As it is, the main avenue to difficulty is shaving seconds off each checkpoint, transforming seemingly impossible time goals into increasingly realistic possibilities. The frustration of dozens of crashes is softened because it's so amusing to see your poor rider go tumbling into empty space, or bang with a grunt into a stone wall. Restarts are instantaneous, so you don't have time to dwell on your failures.

The bikes control like a dream, with quick-turning, believable acceleration arcs and lots of variance between the six unlockable cycles, each of which feels like a "class" of its own. One bike excels at big jumps, while another can't be beat in the off-road. Each one adds a compelling playstyle and a new way to tackle all the courses. In fact, it's that compelling variability between playstyles that leads to my biggest frustration. Each new bike unlocks in parts, and you can't use the vehicle until you get all its parts. In most cases, getting the full set of pieces for a new ride only occurs late in the game, and at especially high challenge thresholds. That's a bummer, because it means players are bound to limited options for most of the game, and may never get to experience the impressive variety in playstyle encouraged by the different bikes.

For the most dedicated players, that distinction won't matter much. Discovering new shortcuts never loses that eureka moment feel, and each trail has a surprising array of alternate paths to explore. Mastering the physics of the cycle and learning the visual language of each landscape is a lengthy and rewarding endeavor. Detailed leaderboards help you not only compete against friends and the wider global playerbase, but also help pinpoint individual checkpoints in any given run where you can still improve. Beyond new mountains and trails, cosmetic unlock rewards let you tweak the appearance of your rider and ride. Go especially off the beaten path, and you can even find all the cleverly hidden resting places on a given mountain. To what end? To see the game pause, and watch your rider relax by a beautiful vista for a well-deserved break.

Lonely Mountains: Downhill is a skill-focused arcade experience of surprising depth and replayability. The relaxing aesthetic is a figurative breath of fresh air when compared to other games that compete to be loudest and most in-your-face. Even so, there's a searing intensity and competitive flair to this outdoor adventure that can easily accommodate serious engagement. Like the real sport, this mountain biking undertaking is ultimately about challenging yourself, and pushing just a little harder to improve, and that's enough to keep me coming back. » **Matt Miller**



Pokémon Sword & Shield

Maxing out the Pokémon formula

gameinformer SILVER

Style 1-Player Role-Playing (4-Player Online) **Publisher** Nintendo, The Pokémon Company **Developer** Game Freak **Release** November 15 **Rating** E

Throughout the history of the Pokémon franchise, each entry has introduced incremental new features and experimented with new mechanics to support your primary goal: traveling the world in search of the rarest and most powerful creatures. Pokémon Sword & Shield carry on this tradition, debuting a new wide-open area and supersized Pokémon in battles, without sacrificing the elements that made the series such a hit in the first place. While not every aspect of this new generation is perfect, Pokémon Sword & Shield bring several crowd-pleasing elements to deliver an outstanding new installment.

Despite the technological leap forward and the aforementioned experiments, the core tenants of the Pokémon series remain intact. You choose a starter Pokémon in your small hometown, then venture across the region and collect new monsters in a quest to defeat eight powerful trainers and gain access to the final challenges. Finding the right combination of Pokémon for pivotal battles remains fun, and I still get a kick out of creating overpowered teams through stat-boosting items and move-teaching TMs that let you bend the rules.

The turn-based battle system is simple and engaging thanks to tons of distinct Pokémon and moves to experiment with. While Sword & Shield deliver a mostly traditional experience, the new Dynamax mechanic adds new wrinkles. It allows one of your Pokémon to grow enormous once per battle for three turns. During that time, it's bigger and more powerful, and I love the strategy it adds of choosing the right time to spend your Dynamax. Your A.I. opponents don't put as much thought into their Dynamaxing; their patterns grow predictable, and surviving is just a matter of being prepared to weather the storm.

While the Dynamax mechanic has the potential to disrupt the flow of any battle, it doesn't factor into most encounters, since it can only be used in gym battles and select other situations. I'm glad it can't be used in every battle (compared to previous generations' Mega Evolutions and Z-Moves), because it feels special and never becomes routine. When Pokémon grow into giants, the sense of scale is impressive, and the power they wield is amazing thanks to over-the-top animations showcasing the more powerful attacks; watching a giant fist plummet from the sky to obliterate your opponent never gets old.

After Sun & Moon did away with traditional gym battles, Sword & Shield bring them back. Gym battles take place in a sports arena with a screaming crowd that reacts to the action on the field, which is awesome and feels like a big event. But outside of the Dynamax mechanics, the battles play out the same as previous entries. Before you get to the gym battle itself, you must complete a gym challenge. These pre-battle tests task you with solving puzzles, battling a gauntlet of trainers, or other unique assignments. While I generally enjoyed them all, my favorite was a pachinko-meets-pinball minigame where you steer a capsule to navigate through a downhill maze.

While the plot is silly and the twists are visible early on, I love the way Sword & Shield introduce recurring characters throughout the adventure. Having the league champion pop up throughout the story, or running into the gym leaders in places other than the gyms makes your eventual encounters with them that much more impactful.

If you feel like breaking away from the linearity presented by the gym challenge, spend a few hours in the Wild Area. It provides a vast expanse full of different biomes and a fully controllable camera, and it breaks up the pacing. When you step into the immense Wild Area, the possibilities feel endless. You can wander and explore to your heart's content, discovering an impressive spectrum of monsters to add to your party. However, once you really dig in and encounter higher-level Pokémon there, the façade of freedom and openness falls apart. Gym badges dictate the level of Pokémon you can to catch, a restriction that's understandable early on when I can't catch a level 26 Onix before I even reach the first gym. But being unable to even throw a Poké Ball at a level 56 Gyarados during my preparations for the final gym battle is annoying.

Despite this frustration, I still enjoyed exploring the Wild Area for hours. Finding new Pokémon to add to my team is thrilling, and the new Max Raid Battles, which pit four trainers against a powerful Dynamaxed Pokémon, are a great way to play with others cooperatively and bag some rare Pokémon in the process. This area is impressively large, but it feels barren. However, with so much terrain to explore and Pokémon to catch, I didn't mind the empty space. An area like this is a dream come true for fans, providing a sense of wonder and exploration unlike what we've typically seen in the series – plus it's a great place to grind to level up your party.

Unfortunately, you won't find every species of Pokémon in the Wild Area or in other parts of the game, as Game Freak cut a large chunk of them from these titles. It's disappointing to have so many classic and fan-favorite creatures missing from this game's Pokédex, but with hundreds of creatures to catch and add to my party, it didn't significantly impact my experience.

Pokémon Sword & Shield are strong first attempts for the series' full transition to consoles. While some frustrations hold it back from true legendary status, this new generation proves the Pokémon franchise is still great more than two decades after its debut. **» Brian Shea**

8.75

Switch

» Concept
Introduce a new region and generation of monsters to a home console for the first time in the Pokémon series

» Graphics
With big towns and bigger Pokémon, the sense of scale is impressively displayed with crisp graphics. The moves have never looked better, but the animations are still behind the times

» Sound
Sword & Shield's town themes are among the series' best, but the digitized Pokémon cries and lack of voiced lines feels more antiquated with each passing entry

» Playability
Pokémon continues to be one of the most approachable role-playing series thanks to an easy-to-navigate world, simple turn-based battles, and a friendly difficulty curve

» Entertainment
The compelling formula of simultaneously building your collections of monsters and gym badges has proven timeless, but the new additions and enhancements show Pokémon isn't done evolving

» Replay Value
Moderately high

Disco Elysium

Living on the edge and loving it

gameinformer GAME OF THE MONTH gameinformer GOLD

Style 1-Player Role-Playing **Publisher** ZA/UM
Developer ZA/UM **Release** October 15 **Rating** NR

9

PC

» Concept
You are an awful person, but a good detective. These two truths combine as you try to solve a grisly murder while wrestling with your own destructive tendencies

» Graphics
The static environments have a stylish, painted look that sells the setting well. The character models are nothing special, but you usually only see them at a distance

» Sound
While not every line of dialogue is voiced, you hear enough to get a good sense of the people and their dispositions. The music is atmospheric, but not exactly catchy

» Playability
Straightforward point-and-click controls handle all of your movement and interactions. The menus can be overwhelming at first, but it all makes sense before long

» Entertainment
The mystery has a satisfying payoff, but the bigger draw is navigating the main character's competing thoughts and weighing what kind of person you want him to be

» Replay Value
Moderately high

When a detective wakes up surrounded by empty bottles in a trashed hotel room, crime fiction has trained us to fill in the blanks with all sorts of issues – substance abuse, egomania, heartbreak. Because Disco Elysium incorporates some of these common elements, it fooled me into thinking I was in familiar narrative territory. I was not. As the hours unfolded, this investigative RPG surprised and delighted me at almost every turn with its complex world, fantastic dialogue, and ability to convey a constant struggle with the warring facets of one's own mind.

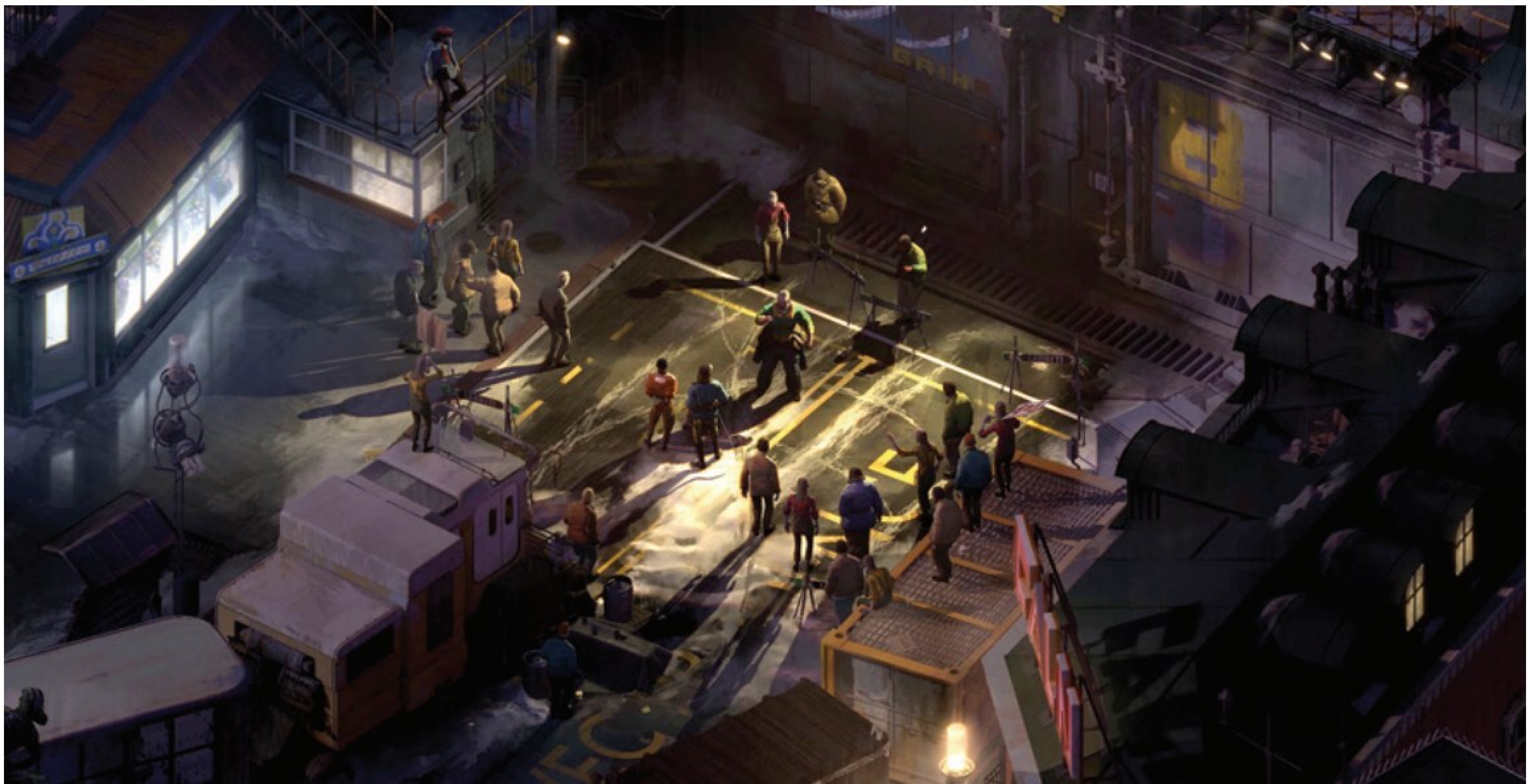
Both as a human and a detective, Disco Elysium's leading man is a disaster – but deciding precisely what kind of disaster is the heart of this fascinating, story-driven murder mystery. Is he an alcoholic trash fire? A delusional prophet of the apocalypse? The answer emerges slowly as you search for clues in the fictional city of Revachol, making choices during conversation and exploration that give you a clearer picture of the miserable person you've become. Maybe you elect to refer to yourself as a "superstar cop" while sporting a pained grimace you cannot suppress. Maybe you break down crying while telling a young woman to wear a hat. Maybe you botch a sad karaoke song despite your best efforts. The sharp writing in exchanges like these made me laugh out loud, and the game does an amazing job remembering and referencing your previous deeds – even things that seem unimportant – which creates a sense of reactivity and consistency that few games can match.

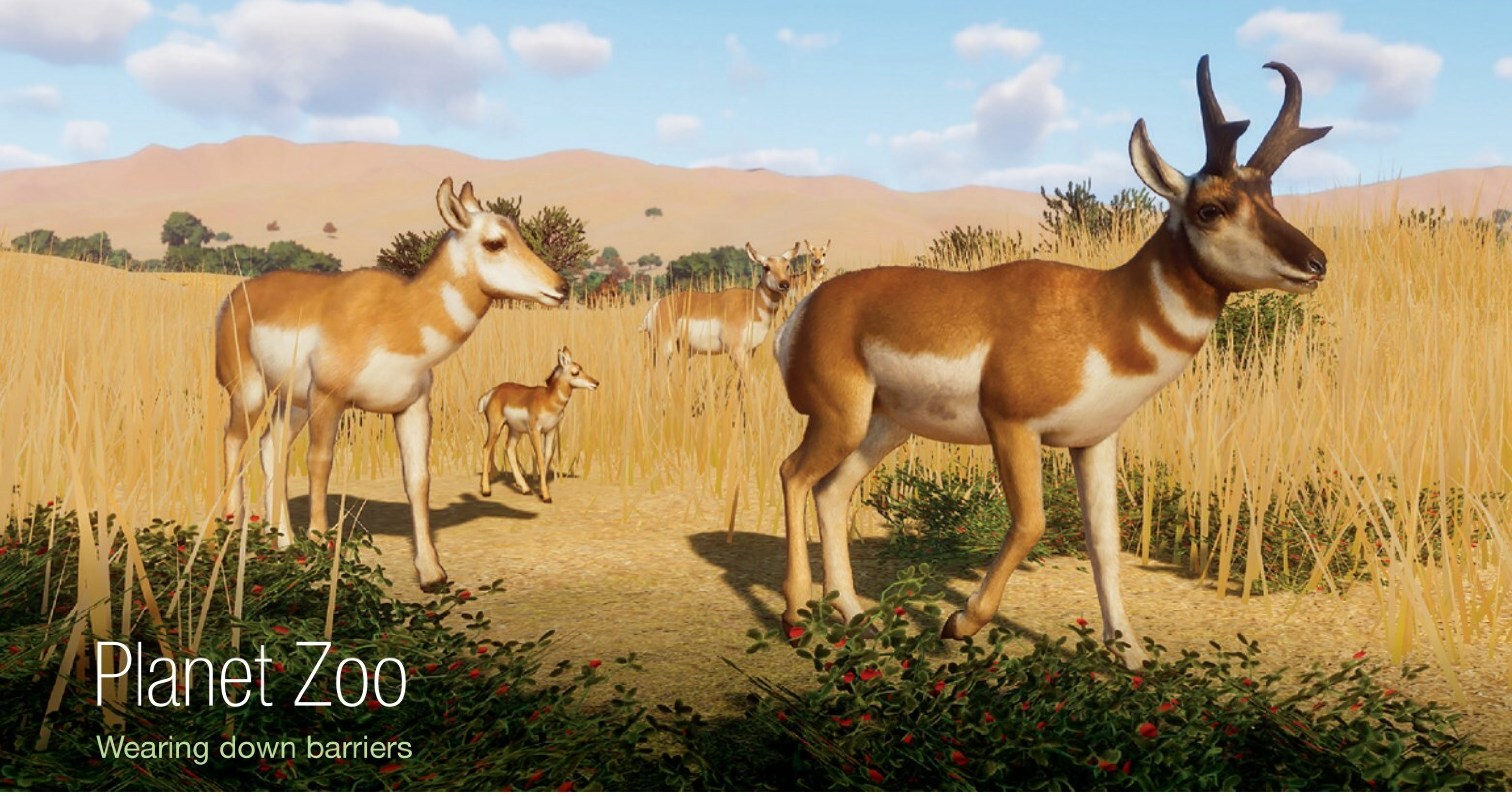
Even more impressive is how much nuance is communicated internally, through your character's thoughts. This is made possible through Disco Elysium's crowning achievement: 24 distinct personality aspects representing your mind and body, each of which may chime in at any time with dialogue exchanges that offer encouragement, provide guidance, or goad you into folly. Though they are a part of you, these aspects also feel like different characters vying for control, with different goals and manners of speaking; Physical Instrument is always eager for violence, Authority wants to assert dominance, and Drama always calls you "sire." Depending on how you want to play, you may trust certain aspects' interjections over others, and their frequent intrusions create the compelling sense that your character is always teetering on the brink of sanity.

Since Disco Elysium has no combat mechanics, your investigation's successes and failures are determined through dice-roll checks tied to each personality aspect, with higher chances for passing if you've invested skill points in the appropriate area. The concept is neat, but it feels a little too arbitrary in practice. With 24 different available aspects and no way of knowing which ones might benefit you in the future, the process of spending your skill points is fuzzy at best. For instance, if you neglect Composure in the early hours, you will probably throw up when you first approach the victim's corpse and be unable to proceed. You can attempt the check again after putting some points in Composure, but earning those points takes time, and you still aren't guaranteed a success. So, even though the game seemingly embraces a "play how you want" philosophy, it also withholds important and excellent moments if you don't invest points in specific ways – or repeatedly save and reload to brute-force certain checks – which is disappointing.

Even with some behind-the-curtain issues, the unique world in front of you in Disco Elysium feels magical. Though the sliver of Revachol you explore is small, its history feels as large as a sprawling epic fantasy. People tell you about wars long lost, paranormal phenomena, and deific figures. The attention to detail creates a fantastical setting that still feels grounded; a melancholy thread runs through it all, but the city is cold and desolate, and the people within it reflect that beautifully. I specifically need to praise Lt. Kim Kitsuragi, who is a great companion character and the perfect foil to the protagonist's spiraling mess of impulses.

A few moments of frustration aren't enough to dim the surreal glow of Disco Elysium. Trying to contain your glorious catastrophe of a "hero" can be simultaneously amusing and horrifying, and that's before you even consider the events of the case surrounding him. I won't spoil any of the major story beats, but the central mystery has immaculate pacing, with new layers and complications folding in at just the right moments. Plus, the payoff is satisfying and surprising. The team at developer ZA/UM only lets you spend a handful of in-game days as a part of Disco Elysium's world, but now that the case is closed, I hope I can report for duty again in the future. » **Joe Juba**





Planet Zoo

Wearing down barriers

Style 1-Player Simulation **Publisher** Frontier Developments **Developer** Frontier Developments **Release** November 5 **Rating** E10+

7

A good simulation game has the power to make micromanagement exciting instead of laborious. Watching your empire grow and seeing the fruits of your decision-making is what drives these experiences, making the overwhelming feeling of pulling so many strings rewarding. Planet Zoo captures a lot of that appeal, trying to take its simulation elements in more meaningful and complex directions. Unfortunately, it spends far too much time on the tedium.

From the creators of Planet Coaster and billed as a spiritual successor to Zoo Tycoon, Planet Zoo doesn't hesitate in throwing you to the lions. It's a challenging simulation due to all the areas you must excel in, and being lucrative isn't your only concern. Angry protesters run amok if you're not giving your animals excellent care. Customers turn into vandals if they aren't enjoying themselves. The animals always need something, and they are clever enough to escape if you don't repair your barriers often enough. All of these factors force you to constantly balance the happiness of animals and people against your pocketbook. I enjoyed the challenge of this juggling act, even if the animals sometimes exhibit diva-like behavior with their high demands.

To please animals, you must research different species and study the basic attributes and tendencies in an expansive encyclopedia. You need to pay attention to things like temperature and terrain type when building your exhibits, and regularly add new toys to keep your animals interested. Even adopting the best-fit animal available within a species can change things drastically. For instance, choosing the timber wolf with a higher fertility rate is in your best interest, even if the high cost sets you back from getting other animals to exhibit.

I was impressed by the scope of the animals, from Komodo Dragons to Japanese Macaques, but learning about them quickly became like taking a boring open-book test. You must constantly reference the zoopedia to succeed, as research often unlocks and records new details, which allows you to improve animals' welfare. The amount of detail and specificity for each species is impressive, but it's presented in such an unappetizing way; spending the majority of your time with your head in a book isn't exactly a fascinating way to learn about different animals in an interactive format.

Building my own zoo and managing the cash flow held the most allure. Zoo themes (like India and Africa) help you create cool designs, and I enjoyed the strategic elements, such as placing souvenir shops by popular exhibits and putting animals' food trays near glass windows so guests get a better view. Training staff members, running marketing campaigns, and selecting pricing are also interesting things to consider.

Planet Zoo kept me on my toes with so many things to weigh, but it doesn't offer adequate guidance for its complexities. Career mode is basically a long tutorial through various zoo types to help teach the basics, but it's awful to play through. On top of listening to bad dad jokes, you get a checklist of tedious tasks to complete, like increasing animal welfare to an extremely high percentage and placing objects and buildings in specific areas. I started with the career mode to learn how to play the game, and it left a terrible first impression. The problem is you need to play some of it to have even the slightest idea of how to navigate the game. Other modes are much more entertaining, as there's everything from economic challenges to just a sandbox to build the zoo of your dreams with no restrictions.

While swapping to other modes mitigated some of my frustrations, it doesn't alleviate the extremely menu-heavy interface. I always felt like I had to go through one more hoop than necessary to find information or take actions. For example, if I researched a new enrichment for my animals, I had to go back into the zoopedia to even see what it was, then back out and go into another menu to find said item and put it in the habitat

Planet Zoo put up a lot of obstacles to my enjoyment, but once I broke through the majority of them, I found that engaging loop of mastery and success that makes simulation games fun. I enjoyed trying to one-up my last creation and surpass my previous revenue and years in business. Unfortunately, Planet Zoo requires an unreasonable level of patience that creates a barrier around its best qualities. » **Kimberley Wallace**

PC

» **Concept**
Construct and manage your own zoo, catering to your animals' and customers' needs while staying profitable

» **Graphics**
The building and animal variety allows you to create majestic zoos, all with their own flair thanks to real-world inspirations

» **Sound**
Sound effects and music add to the atmosphere, especially the noise of crowds, protesters, and distinct animal vocalizations

» **Playability**
With its menu-heavy interface and poorly explained management tools, Planet Zoo is too obtuse for its own good, leaving it hard to recommend to anyone but hardcore simulation fans

» **Entertainment**
Planet Zoo has a lot of ambition and depth, but it often comes at too high a cost

» **Replay Value**
Moderate

reviews archive

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SWITCH

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the score

7.75 Plants Vs. Zombies: Battle For Neighborville

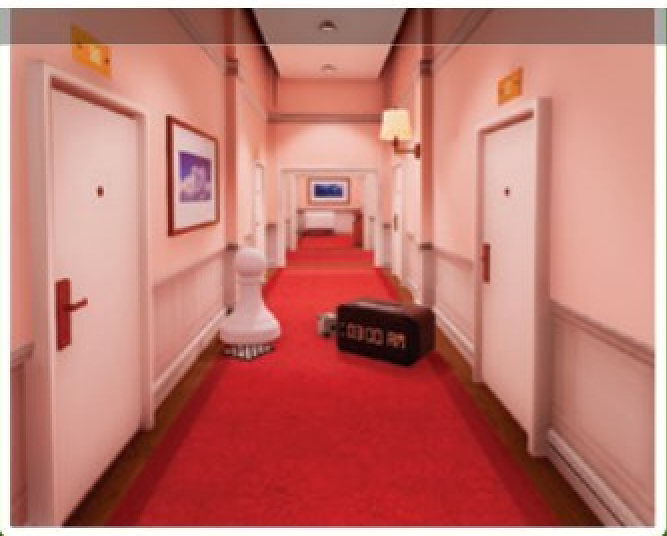
Platform PS4 • Xbox One • PC **Release** October 18 **Rating** E10+

Those looking for zany multiplayer fun can find it here, but that also comes with an unnecessarily complicated economy and inconsistent PvE components. Plants vs. Zombies: Battle for Neighborville lets dedicated soldiers dive back into this long-running conflict, even if everyone else has moved on to other battles. – Brian Shea

7.5 Superliminal

Platform PC **Release** November 12 **Rating** T

When Superliminal's mechanics work, I felt like I was participating in a magic trick. But when they didn't, I felt like the developers were playing a trick on me. I was both amused and frustrated while playing Superliminal, but not enough for it to leave a lasting impression. – Ben Reeves



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gameinformer Volume XXIX ◦ Number 13 ◦ Issue 321

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USPS Statement of Ownership, Management and Monthly Circulation of
GAME INFORMER (Publication No: 1067-6392)
Published Monthly, 12/year @ $19.98
HEADQUARTERS OF PUBLISHER AND PUBLICATION:
Sunrise Publications, 724 N 1st ST FL 3, Minneapolis, MN, 55401-2885
CATHY PRESTON, *Publisher*
ANDY MCNAMARA, *Editor-in-Chief*
ANDREW REINER, *Executive Editor*
OWNER:
GameStop Corp., 625 Westpork Pkwy, Grapevine, TX 76051-3978
STOCKHOLDERS, BONDHOLDERS, MORTGAGE, OTHER SECURITY HOLDERS: *None*

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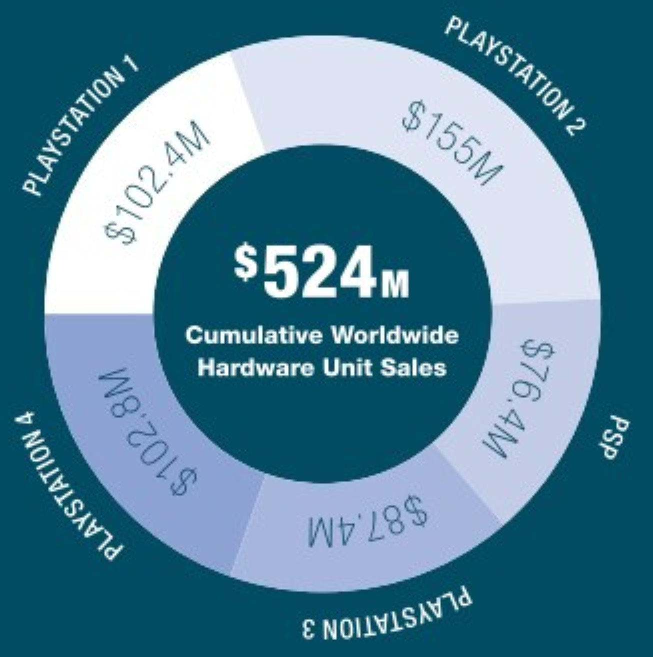
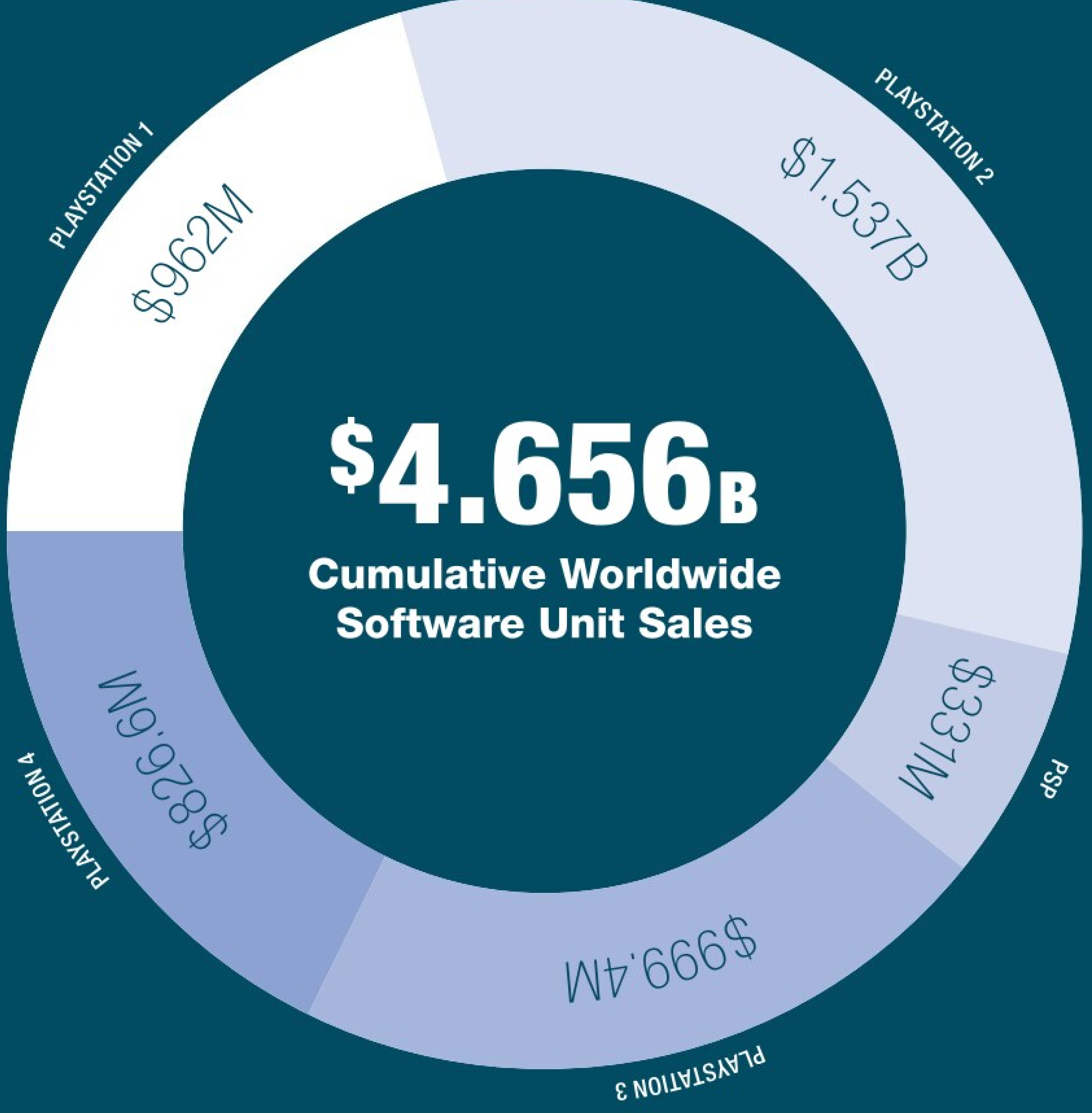
PlayStation By The Numbers

Sony recently announced that PlayStation 4 sales have surpassed those of the PlayStation 1's. That's particularly impressive considering the PS4 has only been out five years. Here's a look at the rest of Sony's console and software sales, so you can see how each generation stacks up.

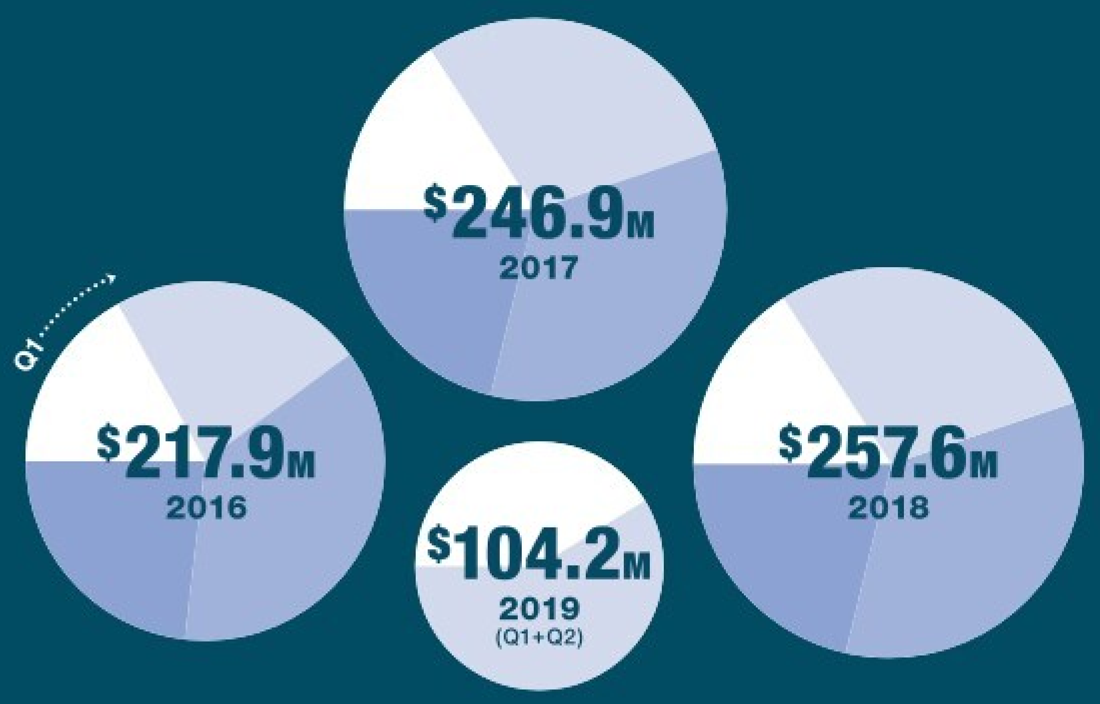
***Note:** Sony has not disclosed the Vita's lifetime sales.*



$524M
Cumulative Worldwide Hardware Unit Sales



$4.656B
Cumulative Worldwide Software Unit Sales

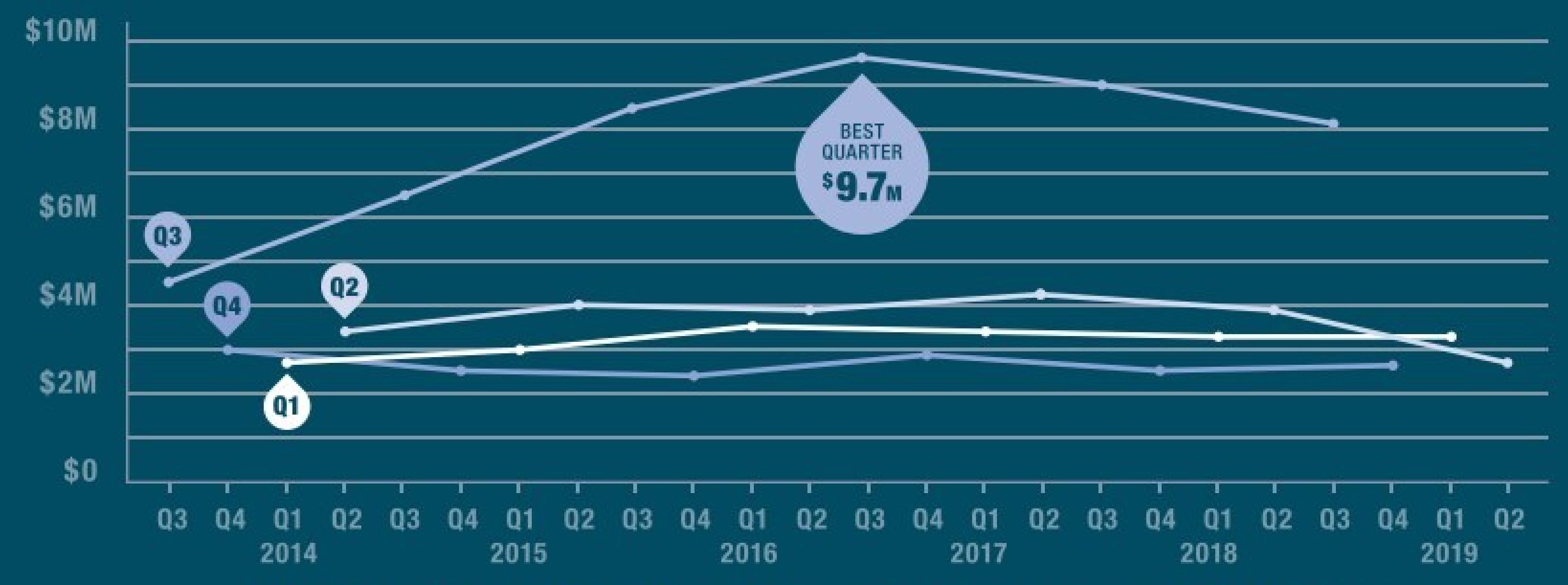


Worldwide PlayStation 4 Software Unit Sales By Year

(does not include download-only software titles)

36.9M
PlayStation Plus Subscribers

(as of September 30, 2019)



Worldwide PlayStation 4 Hardware Unit Sales

Game Informer Magazine® (ISSN 1067-6392) is published ten times per year at a subscription price by Sunrise Publications®, 724 North First Street, 3rd Floor, Minneapolis, MN 55401. (612) 486-6100 or FAX (612) 486-6101. Canada & Mexico orders must add $25/yr additional postage; all other international orders add $35/yr. All orders must be prepaid in U.S. dollars by check, money order or credit card. PowerUp Rewards™ Pro Card may be purchased for $12.00 (includes $7.00 S&H). For subscriptions, back issues, or customer service inquiries call toll free at (866) 844-4263 or mail publisher at above address. Periodicals postage paid at Minneapolis, MN, and additional mailing offices. SUBSCRIBERS/POSTMASTER: Send address changes to Game Informer Magazine®, 724 North First Street, 3rd Floor, Minneapolis, MN 55401. POSTMASTER: Send all UAA to CFS.

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Issue 321 • January 2020

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